Son-In-Law of Discord

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Sequel to "Bride of Discord" and "Daughter of Discord." Now that he's gotten used to living with the Discord family, Prince Mothball thinks he is ready to take the next step with Screwball. However, their plans will have to be put on hold when the changelings want Mothball for their king.

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Son-In-Law of Discord

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Home

I try SO hard not to work on so many fics at once, but...I was bound to relapse sooner or later.

So here it is, the long-awaited sequel to "Bride of Discord" and "Daughter of Discord." I was hoping to start it after "The Princess and the Unicorn," but I've hit a wall in that story and I realized it has been over a year since "Daughter of Discord." I don't think this one's going to be as long, but it is going to have some dark elements in it.

Disclaimer: I do NOT own "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic."

It was quite possibly the second most horrible day of Discord's life. Number One used to be the day he was turned to stone, but that had been replaced long ago with the day he lost the girl of his dreams, even if he had won her back days later.

Today he had taken over Equestria in rage, was nearly turned to stone again, almost lost his family forever, watched his beloved wife die and was molested by the crazed Queen of the Changelings.

It would've topped all his bad days, had it not ended in happiness.

Thanks to his powerful daughter, Screwball, the changelings were no longer a threat and by some strange magic, his sweet Fluttershy had come back from the dead. With the return of his infant son, Zany, who had been kidnapped by the changelings, his family was whole again and all of Ponyville rejoiced in a grand celebration.

However, Discord was about ready to put this day at Number One, due to the fact that his daughter's boyfriend was moving in.

Don't get him wrong. Mothball was a decent colt. He had rescued Zany from the changelings, helped Screwball defeat the army with their magical kiss and he made the girl happy.

Discord would've liked him a lot better had he not been the son of the witch that wanted to ruin his life.

"Wilkommen!" Screwball exclaimed as she opened the door to the castle. "La Il Château de Caos!"

The changeling walked in, a yellow pegasus with pink hair fluttering behind him, a gray foal also with pink hair and red spiral eyes, matching Screwball's purple ones. Fluttershy raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

"What language were you speaking?"

The pink, purple-haired pony in the propeller hat shrugged. "No idea!"

Mothball gawked at the interior of the Castle of Chaos. The entrance hall was kept relatively normal for the convenience of guests, with green walls bearing family photos, a red couch, a pink and purple checkerboard for a floor, a green crescent-shaped coffee table and a fire place. When he looked up, he saw stairs leading to nowhere and blue doors hanging in mid-air. He nearly collapsed from dizziness.

Screwball giggled at his reaction. "That's right! You haven't been inside before!"

Mothball groaned as he put his hoof to his head. "My head hurts…"

"You'll get used to it! This is your new home, after all!"

He blinked and stared at her. "My…my…"

His legs slid out from underneath him. Panicked, Screwball caught him in her hooves before he hit the floor. Her mother giggled and Screwball looked at her in confusion.

"What'd I say?"

"Sorry," Fluttershy grinned. "It's just that I reacted the same way when I first came here! Do you remember that, Discord?" She frowned when she saw her husband wasn't at her side. "Discord?"

The draconequus peeped his gray head through the front doorway, his expression unreadable.

"Yes," he sighed. "I remember that, darling."

Mothball grumbled as he slowly regained consciousness. Screwball chuckled.

"Glad to see you're alive."

"What happened?" he asked, blushing once he realized Screwball was holding him like a doll.

"You fainted. I was talking about how this was your new home and you fainted. What gives?"

"Sorry," he said, rising to his hooves. "It's just…" his eyes wandered around the room, taking every detail into account, "I've never had a home before. I mean I did, but…"

He went quiet, but Screwball didn't need to hear the rest. Before he had left the changelings to be with Screwball, Mothball had been Queen Chrysalis' heir. He was the rarest kind of changeling, a royal, with the height of an alicorn, slit pupils in his eyes and very powerful. Because he was the only royal changeling other than the queen, he was next in line.

The hive was the only home he ever knew. It wasn't a terrible home. He had his own room and everything. But it never felt like home, for even though he had thousands of brothers and sisters, no one really cared for him. His siblings were all jealous of him and his mother literally didn't have the heart to love him fully. Mothball was the only changeling with a heart, which he had inherited from his pony father. He was still shocked by the recent news from his mother that it takes two to make a royal changeling, though she didn't tell him who his father was.

Oddly enough, he wasn't wondering so much about that. All he could think about was this big change in his life: finding his true love, leaving the only family he had ever known, defeating that family with powerful magic and now moving into this funhouse of a castle.

Screwball put her hoof around him. "Well, we'll make you feel right at home here!"

"That's right," Fluttershy said, patting his head. "You're a part of the family now. Right, Zany?"

The baby colt giggled in response. Discord said nothing, only stared at the changeling.

He looked so much like his mother: green eyes, tiny fangs, blue cobweb hair, a beetle's back, insect wings, holes in his black legs… The only thing he didn't seem to inherit from her was her character. He must've gotten that from his father, whoever he was. Discord knew the changeling meant no harm, especially after Zecora had explained to him that Mothball was not feeding off Screwball's love because her love was reciprocated, but just looking at him brought back so many memories…

Discord stiffened as the teens moved in for a kiss. His fatherly instinct got the better of him as he lunged between them.

"Hold up, hold up!" he exclaimed, darting his eyes at the changeling. "If you're going to live here, we're gonna have to set some ground rules. Rule Number One: you are not to come within twelve feet of each other!"

"Dad!" Screwball whined.

"Fine, twelve *inches* . So no touching! Ever! Rule Number Two: you are never to be alone in the same room together! Rule Number Three…" His eyes were burning into Mothball's now. "If you hurt my daughter or any other member of my family in any way, I swear I will turn your brains into soup and serve you to the vultures with fava beans and…"

"DISCORD!"

The draconequus grew silent at the angry sound of his wife's voice. He straightened up and smiled innocently.

"Yes, my love? What can I do for you?"

She put her free hoof on her hip and raised her eyebrow at him. This look was softer than her Stare, but it alone was enough to bring the guilt out of Discord.

"Be nice."

Those two words were all that was needed to make him submit. His arms drooped to his sides as he let out a groan.

"Fine. I'll play nice with the little insect."

He begrudgingly patted Mothball on the head, which made the changeling cringe in discomfort.

"So, uh…" Screwball uttered, attempting to break the ice. "Why don't I show you around? It's easy to get lost in this place. So those two pink double doors are Mom and Dad's room, the white one with the purple spiral is my room… Hey, where's he gonna sleep?"

"We can spruce up one of the guest rooms," Fluttershy offered. "You can ask Discord to decorate it however you like."

"Do I have to?" Discord grumbled.

"Yes," his wife scowled.

Mothball whispered to Screwball, "I thought you said he liked me."

"He does," Screwball assured him. "He's just a grump. Plus, you're dating his daughter, and now you're gonna be in the same living space as her." She blushed at the thought. "Anything could happen."

The changeling tilted his head in confusion. After a moment, his eyes widened and his cheeks flushed to match hers as he caught her drift.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" he exclaimed, backing away from her. "We…we said 'I love you' just yesterday and only just had our first kiss! We're not…we just…"

" *I* know that," Screwball whispered, "and *you* know that, but *Dad* doesn't *think* we know that."

As if making an example, Discord teleported between them, holding up a ruler.

"The twelve-inch rule still stands!"

Screwball rolled her swirly eyes. This had to be the longest day of her entire life.

Mothball lay in his new bed and glanced around at his new room. He'd had it renovated to look like his old chamber back in the hive: green cave-like walls, a huge bed with a crystalized mattress, a thin black blanket and a hard pillow. It was all he really needed to feel comfortable. Screwball had added a black armoire with new outfits for him to wear. He didn't normally wear clothes, even while disguised, but it was still a nice thought.

It was strange that he was purposely reminding himself of the hive. His current home or not, it was still the place he had grown up in, and it's hard to give up the bed you slept in for seventeen years.

His head turned as the door slowly creaked open. He wasn't used to having a door. His old room had been sealed off by a black curtain that seldom made noise. He was expecting Screwball, but was surprised by Fluttershy.

"Oh," she whispered. "I thought you'd be asleep by now."

Mothball shrugged. "I have a lot on my mind."

"I can imagine," Fluttershy said as she sat on the bed.

"So what are you doing here, Miss Fluttershy?"

She laughed. "Just Fluttershy is fine. I came to see if you needed any pony to tuck you in."

He sat up and looked at her puzzlingly. "Tuck me in?"

"As a mother, I make sure all my little ones are tucked safely in their beds and asleep."

He pointed to himself. "I'm your little one?"

"But of course. You're a part of this family now. I consider you one of my little ones. Oh, you don't mind, do you?"

"No, uh…sure."

Fluttershy smiled and laid Mothball back as she pulled the covers over him.

"Did your mother ever tuck you in?"

He flinched at the mention of his mother, but he answered the question anyway. "Not really." He paused to look up at the pegasus. "Um…Miss Fluttershy?"

"Yes, Mothball?"

He bit his lip. "Do you think…well, maybe…can I…can I call you Mom?"

Fluttershy's eyes widened for a second, but then her lips curled into a sweet smile. "If that is what you wish, sweetie."

She leaned forward and surprised Mothball further by kissing him lightly on the forehead. He felt a surge of motherly love pass through him.

"If you guys are gonna be so nice to me," he muttered, "I'm gonna have to learn to control my feeding."

Fluttershy giggled. "I'll keep that in mind. Goodnight, Mothball."

She flapped her wings and hovered to the door.

"Oh, Miss Flutter…Mom?"

She turned back. "Yes?"

Mothball looked shyly down at the floor. "Thanks for everything."

Fluttershy flashed him one last smile before closing the door and whispering, "You're welcome."

When she turned around she saw her husband sitting on the couch with his head in his hands. Her smile wavered when she noticed the sadness etched in his face. She flew over to him and gently placed her hoof on his back.

"Honey?"

Discord looked up and smiled. Then without saying a word, he brought her to his chest and ran his fingers through her silky mane. Fluttershy didn't need to ask why he was doing this and snaked her hooves around him while listening to his heartbeat.

"I can't ever lose you again," he whispered.

Fluttershy shook her head. "You won't."

He pulled away and looked at her seriously. "I *mean* it, Fluttershy. You're the only thing in this world that keeps me sane."

"That's not true. What about the kids?"

He shook his head. "You saw what happened. When I saw you kissing that stallion…"

"It wasn't me, it was a changeling."

"I know that, but when I thought I had lost your love…" He trailed off as he caressed her face with his paw. "Not even the kids could keep me sane. They're as chaotic as I am. But you…" His claw moved to her face as well and Fluttershy closed her eyes as she leaned into his touch. "You're the pony who brought light into my heart, who taught me to love, who showed me that there's more to life than chaos. And when I saw you die, I…"

Tears filled his eyes. He couldn't finish. Fluttershy opened her eyes and reached up to touch his face.

"Shhh," she whispered. "I'm here now. And I'll never leave you again."

He closed his eyes and sighed in content as he held her hoof to his face. "Nor I, you. And I'm not gonna waste another second with

you." His eyes opened again as an idea came to him. "Starting right now."

He snapped his fingers and the couch disappeared. The entrance hall was then remodeled into a ballroom, the walls and floor turned gold. The chandelier above them glowed brighter than ever before, but dull enough so it didn't hurt their eyes. Discord snapped his fingers again and the two of them were dressed in elegant attire. Fluttershy gasped at the familiar golden gown embroidered in roses and vines. She lifted the skirts to find golden slippers on her hooves. Her mane was tied into a ponytail falling loosely over her shoulder, a rose settled above her left ear. Discord wore a black tuxedo with white lining the jacket and yellow buttons to match the bowtie. A third snap of his fingers and violin music started playing. Fluttershy smiled at the tune.

"Our first date."

Discord grinned. "The best night of my existence."

She raised her eyebrow coyly. "Next to our wedding night?"

He shook his head. "No, because that night was the night I fell in love with the most beautiful mare in the world. And to think, I had the honor of kissing and dancing with her." He bowed as he held out his gloved claw. "May I have that honor again?"

Fluttershy giggled as she placed her hoof in his claw. "Always."

Mothball's thoughts were interrupted at the sound of violin music. Curious, he climbed out of bed and slowly opened the door. His eyes widened at the sight of Screwball's parents dancing in the middle of the entrance hall, which had been transformed into a ballroom.

Fluttershy's head was on Discord's chest and he held her close as he gently twirled her around. His paw was wrapped around her tiny waist and his claw clutched her delicate hoof to keep her from falling. She was so much smaller than him, but for them, size didn't matter.

Mothball was in awe. Even if he couldn't feel the emotion radiating off the couple, he could see in their eyes and the way they held each other that the love they shared was powerful. More than that, it was the most powerful love he had ever felt. It was no wonder his mother had tried to take advantage of it.

What amazed him the most was the soft look in Discord's eyes. He had never seen the draconequus look so…peaceful. Maybe Screwball was right about him not being as grumpy as he seemed.

He decided to give the couple some privacy and quietly shut the door. As he crawled back into bed, his thoughts returned to his mother.

He had always known his mother and Discord had had a history, but his mother had never given the details. He wondered what could've happened between them to make his mother so angry.

Discord was young, around fourteen. He had really lost track of time since the awful blizzard that took his parents. It must've been at least five years, maybe longer. He didn't really care how long he had been wandering aimlessly throughout the lands. All that mattered to him was finding a place to settle down.

He was in a forest of black trees, almost appearing dead. Despite the lack of leaves, the branches still loomed overhead, blocking out the sun. Discord never minded the dark. He loved how chaotic and familiar it was. Anything could be hiding in the darkness and he would spend hours guessing what it was in order to kill boredom.

Discord looked down as his lion paw stepped in a puddle. He peered at his reflection and saw the gray head of a teenage colt with a black mane, a mop of white on top. His single fang had grown over the years, but was still relatively small. His eyelids drooped over his yellow eyes with red pupils.

After a while, he splashed the puddle with his eagle claw, his reflection rippling.

Maybe he should just give up. He was never going to find a family that would accept him. He was too different.

His head shot up when he heard the snap of a tree branch. He spun around.

"Who's there?" He used his magic to summon a weapon. "I'm warning you! I've got a baseball bat and I'm not afraid to use it!"

There was a loud crack and a high-pitched screech. He turned to see a fallen tree branch and on top of it was a strange creature he had never seen before.

His parents had told him about ponies, along with all the other animals whose parts he had, and this creature had a similar shape. However, it was more…distorted. Its legs had holes in them like Swiss cheese, its horn was like the crooked black branch it had just fallen from, its holed wings were like a fly's, on its back was a green shell like a beetle's and its blue hair and tail were stringy like cobwebs. Discord made his bat ready when he saw the small fangs, in case the creature was carnivorous.

The thing looked up at him with green slit eyes. It squealed and green flames engulfed it. Discord was about to put out the fire with a hose when the creature suddenly became less deformed and more like a pony. Now it was a yellow foal with pink hair and brown eyes. Discord's jaw dropped at the display.

"How did you do that?"

The creature tilted its head, confused at his reaction.

"It's okay," he said, reaching out his paw. "I won't hurt you."

The thing looked at his paw and then into his eyes, probably deciding whether or not to trust him. After a while, it took its paw and changed back to its previous form. When he helped it to its hooves, he realized it was just his height when he was on all fours. The creature leaned in closer and squinted at him.

"What *are* you?" it said in a female voice.

Discord jumped back and released the thing's hoof. "You're a girl?"

She glared at him. "Of course I'm a girl, you dummy!" She put her hoof to her chest and proudly raised her head. "I happen to be a princess!"

Discord snorted. "Yeah, right."

"It's true! I am Princess Insectra Arachne Chrysalis Changeling III. Chrysalis to my friends."

He blinked. "Right. And I'm King Discord Q. Draconequus the Fifty-Fifth."

"I'm serious, you joker! I'm heir to the changeling throne!"

He blinked again. "What's a changeling?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're really dense, aren't you? A changeling's a shape shifter. I can turn into anything."

"Really?" Discord said excitedly. "Can you turn into a puppy?"

Chrysalis sighed and complied with his request, taking the form of a young St. Bernard. Discord nodded in approval.

"Impressive. How about a whale?"

She changed again, but back to herself. "Fine. I can't turn into big things yet. I'm only twelve."

"Ha!" Discord huffed. "I can do better than that!"

He snapped his talons and a small pink cloud appeared, brown liquid dripping from it. Chrysalis gasped as he summoned a glass and filled it with the liquid. He handed it to her.

"Go ahead, try it."

She looked at him warily. "How do I know it's not poisoned?"

Discord dramatically put his paw to his chest. "Why, Chrissy, what kind of creature do you take me for?"

"I don't know. You haven't answered my question yet. What are you?"

"A draconequus. Now drink the chocolate milk."

She hesitantly took the glass and sipped from it. Her eyes widened in amazement.

"It…it tastes just like love!"

Discord tilted his head. "How do you know that?"

"Oh. Changelings feed off emotions. Love is one of them."

He backed away in fright.

"Relax," Chrysalis assured him. "It's only to gain more power if needed. We eat other stuff."

"You're not gonna feed off me though, are you?"

"Heck no." Her eyes moved to the pink cloud. "How'd you do that, anyway?"

Discord shrugged. "I was born with it."

"Does your species do that sort of thing?"

He hung his head. "They did. They're all gone though."

Discord could've been mistaken, but he could've sworn the changeling was looking at him with sympathy.

"You're all alone?"

He nodded.

"Do you have a place to stay?"

He shook his head.

"Then come with me back to the hive."

He looked up at her in surprise. "Why?"

She shrugged. "That's what friends do."

Discord felt like he was going to faint. "We're friends?"

Chrysalis held out her hoof. "Sure? Why not?" Her lips moved into an evil grin. "Would I steer you wrong?"

Discord sat up in bed with a gasp. He looked down at his wife. She was turned away from him, sleeping peacefully on her side. As much as he loved watching her sleep, he needed to be alone for a bit. He teleported himself to the entrance hall and slumped on the couch. He snapped his fingers to light the fireplace and again for a glass of chocolate milk.

He wished he had never met that venomous spider. If he had known her true nature back then, he would've never gone with her to the hive, let alone agree to be her friend. He thought they had been friends, but she had betrayed him.

He knew he should listen to his wife and let go of the past, but after today, the past just kept coming back to him.

He remembered the anger in the queen's eyes when she had sworn he had broken her heart. It still made him shudder to think that witch had once been in love with him and that she had removed her heart from her chest because he had broken it.

Was it true? Had she really been in love with him all that time?

Then Discord began to wonder if things could've turned out differently.

"Sir?"

He jumped at the sound of the prince's voice. Mothball was standing right beside him.

"What are you doing up?" Discord snapped. "You weren't in my

daughter's room, were you?!"

"No, no!" Mothball insisted, holding up his hoof. "I just got hungry."

"So you're having one of us for a midnight snack?!"

"Will you stop? I just wanted some chocolate milk."

That softened Discord. "You like chocolate milk?"

The changeling grinned. "I *love* it!"

Discord stared at him and then sighed. He summoned a second glass.

"Here," he said coldly, handing him the glass. "Now go away."

Mothball was about to obey his command when a thought occurred to him. He turned back to the draconequus.

"What are *you* doing up, sir?"

Discord grunted. "None of your business."

He expected the changeling to leave, but instead he seated himself beside him. Discord was about to tell him to go away again, but he wasn't in the mood.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Mothball let out a light chuckle.

"You know," he said, holding up his glass, "Screwy was the one who introduced me to chocolate milk? I told her I was hungry, but she didn't know my diet. I didn't wanna be rude, so I drank the glass she gave me. Chocolate milk tastes a lot like love, you know?"

Discord sat up and looked down at him with wide eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said chocolate milk tastes like love."

An image of young Chrysalis flashed in his mind. He shook his head with a grunt.

"You okay, sir?" Mothball asked.

Discord wanted to avoid talking about the boy's mother and asked a question he'd been wondering for a while.

"How did you and Screwy meet? I mean I know when you met, but how?"

Mothball looked down at his glass and smiled. "It was my twelfth birthday. When a changeling turns twelve, they go off on their first hunt. I found myself in the Everfree Forest and I heard the sweetest sound. I discovered a chocolate lake and swimming in it was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen." He sighed. "Her melodious voice, her curly purple and white hair, her hypnotic eyes…"

Discord coughed into his paw.

"Right," Mothball said, shaking his head. "Anyway, I felt something pounding inside me and figured it was my stomach. I took the form of Dinky, but Screwy wasn't fooled. She…" He blushed in embarrassment. "She started banging my head into the ground."

The draconequus chuckled. "That's my girl."

"She forced me to reveal myself and the strange thing was…she didn't run."

Mothball paused to take a sip of his chocolate milk. "She was the first friend I ever had."

Discord's eyes widened. "Fluttershy was *my* first friend."

He was about to say "not counting your mother," but he stopped himself. Chrysalis was never really his friend.

"I mean I had thousands of brothers and sisters," Mothball continued, "but I never hung out with them. See, I was always different from the other changelings, not just because I was a royal. I mean I also had a heart, but I didn't know that yet. I…I always felt like I didn't belong. When I met Screwy…I felt like I finally belonged somewhere, and for the first time…I felt like I had a heart." He looked up at Discord in the eye. "You know what I'm saying?"

Discord was silent as he stared down at the changeling. He resembled his mother greatly, but now when he looked at him, he saw himself.

He was an outcast. He'd been ostracized for being different all his life. Suddenly Discord felt bad for calling him a heartless monster so many times, when he had been called the same, and it took the love of a mare to change them both.

"Yes, Mothball," Discord whispered. "I believe I do."

Mothball didn't need to hear anything else. The sympathy in the draconequus' eyes was enough.

"I'm going to bed," he announced, sliding off the couch.

"Wait," Discord said, putting his claw on the changeling's shoulder.

Mothball flinched at his touch but turned to face him. He was surprised to find the draconequus smiling at him.

"You're okay, kid," he said, patting him on the back. "You're okay." Then he leaned forward and glared. "But if you do anything to hurt my daughter, so help me…"

The changeling grinned nervously. "Of course, sir!"

Discord released him and Mothball didn't hesitate to run back to his room. The draconequus watched him cautiously, but he wasn't as worried as before.

For now he knew that the boy would never harm his daughter.

Chrysalis sat in the middle of Mothball's room, staring at his old bed. In her hooves was the thin black blanket he had slept with since birth. She held it up to her chest, her eyes holding no emotion, as blank as the winter night sky.

She had thought that by removing her heart, the hurting would stop. But it wasn't until after she had done the deed that she realized

emotion didn't come solely from the heart. She felt nothing in her chest and shed no tears, but her stomach felt heavy and her head was tingling.

She didn't care about her defeat in Ponyville. There would be other battles.

It was the cost that had made her like this.

She had lost her son.

She recalled the day Mothball had been born. She hadn't expected it. It was just another one of her monthly births. She'd gotten too used to them to feel any pain. She got a surprise when one of the nurse changelings announced:

"Your majesty, this one's a royal."

The nurse handed her the black larva, which was twice the size of its newborn siblings. Its eyes were green with slit pupils, the sign of a royal.

"A prince," she muttered. "An heir to my throne." She held him up. "You will become the deadliest changeling of them all, so deadly that even your own kind will fear you!" She grinned at the thought. "And what's deadlier to an insect than a mothball?"

She had tried so hard not to fail this time, to turn her child into a king while remaining unattached. But all in vain.

It had happened again. She had driven her child away and once again, she was left without an heir.

"Your majesty?"

She did not need to turn around to know it was General Mantis standing in the doorway.

"The other changelings want to know what our next course of action is."

The queen stiffened. "Tell them that we will not be planning another

attack for a while. Not until we've…recovered from our defeat."

The general took a cautious step forward. "I'm sorry, my queen."

"For what?!" she snapped.

"The prince. I know you didn't want to lose another heir…"

"SILENCE! You know the law! No one is to speak of that again! And as of right now, you will all do the same with Mothball! None shall ever speak his name, or of his betrayal! Seal off this room! Prince Mothball never existed, do you understand?!"

He bowed. "Yes, my queen."

"Good," she sighed. "Though there is no doubt that a new heir is needed. We will have one soon. And this time…" She pulled on the blanket so hard that it ripped. "No mistakes."

I don't know when I'm going to update next, since I'm apparently working on three fics at once now as well as planning one for Christmas. But I'm glad I'm finally getting to this, because this has been in the works since last year. I've also been dying to expand the backstory between Discord and Chrysalis. This may not turn out as great as the other two fics, but there was so much in "Daughter of Discord" I didn't get to wrap up.

Leave a review!

Family

Sorry for the time jump, but I wanted to get to the point of the story.

It felt weird being at a wedding. Five years ago, a wedding for Mothball meant hunting ground. After all, there was no event that had more love.

Who knew Mothball would end up being a groomstallion at one?

He was in one of his many disguises: a green unicorn with blue hair, dressed in a blue tuxedo to match the groom's. Standing in front of him was Applejack and Spike's adopted son Cinnamon Stick, Rainbow Dash and Soarin's fourteen-year-old daughter Prism and their older daughter Lightning Dash, who stood behind her twin brother Thunder as the best mare. The pegasus was staring into his bride's brilliant green eyes. Apple Blossom was in a simple but elegant white gown, her orange mane tied up in a bun. Behind her stood her teenage cousin Cinnamon Roll, followed by Screwball and their friend Dinky.

The five-year-old dragon-pony Applespike sat at Cinnamon Roll's hooves, his green reptilian eyes staring intently at the jeweled golden rings in the cushion he held. Cinnamon Roll kept glancing at her brother to make sure he didn't eat them. Beside him, with an empty basket in her mouth, stood Rarity and Fancy Pants' youngest daughter Jewel, a white three-year-old unicorn with a smooth lavender mane tied into a tiny ponytail.

Princess Twilight Sparkle stood between the bride and groom, giving her speech. Mothball didn't pay much heed to it as his gaze wandered around the crowd.

The wedding was held at Sweet Apple Acres, the bride and groom standing beneath the gazebo as they said their vows while the attendees watched from the two columns of wooden benches. On

the groom's side was the Dash family, his parents in the front row. Soarin was sobbing his eyes out while Rainbow was patting him on the back, trying very hard not to do the same. Behind the family sat all their friends, including the Discord, Pants, Sparkle and Pie families.

The bride's side stretched out much further, as it contained every single member of the Apple family. Apple Blossom's parents, Big Macintosh and Cheerilee, sat in the front row, along with her uncle Spike, her aunts Applejack and Applebloom, and Granny Smith (it was a wonder how that pony was still alive).

Mothball turned his attention back to the bride and groom. Over the five years he had lived with Screwball, he had gotten to know her friends better. Thunder Dash and Cinnamon Stick had become his best friends and were quite helpful in dating advice, since they had girlfriends themselves. He couldn't help but smirk whenever he saw Cinnamon Stick and Dinky lean out of their lines to steal glances from each other.

Mothball could feel the love radiating off the soon-to-be-married couple as well as the not-married one. While he'd learned to control his feeding around ponies, he could still feel instances of love without trying. He was glad to see the two lovebirds tying the knot, as Screwball had told him they had been crushing on each other since kindergarten and had only started dating five years ago, not long before Mothball came into the picture.

After Twilight had used her magic to slide the rings onto the bride's and groom's hooves, she announced, "I now pronounce this couple husband and wife."

Thunder Dash and Apple Blossom didn't wait for the princess to tell them to kiss. The crowd cheered, but the bride's family was the loudest as they shouted "Yee-haw!" and threw their hats in the air.

The reception was even rowdier, as the bride and groom's first dance was to an upbeat country tune. Mothball stood and watched from the punchbowl with Lightning and Cinnamon Stick.

"Guess this means we're related now," the earth pony said to the

pegasus.

"Guess so," Lightning giggled. "So," she said with a sly grin, "when are you and Dinky gonna tie the knot?"

Cinnamon Stick's brown cheeks turned red. "Well, uh…we kinda decided to wait until our baking business gets off the ground. You know. We wanna be able to provide for each other before we take any big leaps."

Lightning Dash sighed as she watched other couples join the bride and groom on the dance floor.

"Looks like I'm the only single one in the group."

"You still have time," Mothball pointed out. "I mean you guys are hardly even twenty yet."

"Yeah," Cinnamon Stick smirked. "Thunder had to marry my cousin *now* because Uncle Big Mac wasn't sure of his 'intentions' towards his daughter."

"Boy, do I know how that feels," the changeling muttered under his breath.

"I know we're all young," Lightning sighed, "but now that my brother's settling down, I kinda wanna settle down too."

"You sure you're ready after that breakup with Aquafresh?" Cinnamon Stick asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Then you're in luck. 'Cuz I think my cousin Apple Tart over there's giving you the eye."

Lightning looked in the direction he was pointing and then raised an eyebrow at him. "Aren't they all my cousins now?"

"Only by marriage. Besides," he whispered in her ear, "they're distant."

The pegasus grinned and made her way across the field.

"Think it'll work out?" Cinnamon Stick asked Mothball.

The changeling shrugged. "They both have a slight attraction. I can't predict the future though."

"Hey!"

"Oomph!" Mothball exclaimed as a pink hoof wrung around his neck.

"How 'bout a dance, Lover Boy?" Screwball demanded.

The changeling smiled. "Sure."

She pouted. "I wish you wouldn't wear that disguise. Ponies are used to you enough."

Mothball sighed. "The ponies of *Ponyville* are used to seeing me. Apple Blossom's cousins, however…"

"Oh, so what if they see you? What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know. A giant mob of cowponies carrying pitchforks and shotguns?"

"Oh, you!" she giggled, playfully nudging his shoulder.

"No, he's right, actually," Cinnamon Stick said with a shrug. "There's always a pitchfork or something at these things, in case the groom gets cold hooves. Did ya hear about my parents' wedding?"

Screwball rolled her eyes. "You're not helping. Whatever. I still want that dance."

She pulled her disguised boyfriend onto the dance floor. Mothball was usually a splendid dance partner, as all changelings learned to dance as a way of seduction. However, he was not prepared for square dancing. Screwball ended up taking the lead and twirled him on his hooves before dipping him.

"Just so you know," she said, bringing him back up to her eye-level,

"you won't have to wear a disguise at *our* wedding."

"Oh, that's good, I guess." He paused and then looked at her with wide eyes. "Wait, what?"

"Ahem!"

They looked up to see Discord looming over them.

"Dad!" Screwball groaned. "I'm almost twenty! Lay off!"

"Chill, sweetie!" the draconequus said, putting up his hands. "I only wanted to ask my daughter for a dance. Your friend there is doing the same."

He pointed to where Apple Blossom and Big Macintosh were dancing; Thunder Dash and Rainbow a few feet away.

Screwball smiled as she took her father's paw. "Okay, Daddy."

She sent Mothball one last glance before pulling into Discord's embrace. The changeling was left in a daze at what Screwball had just said.

He stepped back and watched her laugh as her father spun her around. He had always loved that bubbling laugh of hers. It was one of the first things he had found interesting about her. It was so enchanting that he couldn't help but laugh along with it.

Her bridesmaid gown was red to go with the apple theme. She wasn't wearing her propeller hat, which was rare, allowing her purple and white curls to fly freely in the wind. Even from afar, he could see the sparkle in her swirly purple eyes. He longed for them to be near again so he could gaze into infinity.

Things had been going well over the past five years. Despite Discord's constant hovering, Mothball enjoyed living in the Castle of Chaos. There was so much space and with so many rooms filled with random things, it was hard to get bored. Fluttershy had taken the role of his adoptive mother and while her constant nitpicking could get annoying (fixing his mane and dressing him for the weather), he rather liked the warmth he received from her.

His thoughts were momentarily interrupted by a high-pitched scream: "MOM!"

Mothball looked down as a three-year-old purple alicorn with a short light blue and pink mane ran past him. She was followed by Zany, now five years old with a picture book hovering beside him, snapping like an alligator.

"ZANY'S TRYING TO BITE ME WITH MY BOOK!" the young alicorn screeched.

"Om, nom, nom, nom, nom!" Zany taunted as he used his chaotic magic to open and close the book.

It was stopped by a green aura that carried it into Mothball's hooves. Zany flinched under his glare. Even though the changeling was disguised, Zany somehow always knew it was his sister's boyfriend.

"Really, Zany?" Mothball said sternly. "How many times has your mother told you to play nice with the other kids?"

"I *was* playing nice!" Zany protested, crossing his hooves. "But Twinkle Toes is a scaredy cat!"

"I am not!" the alicorn filly exclaimed, walking up with an orange pegasus stallion at her side.

"What's going on?" Flash Sentry demanded.

"Zany here was chasing Twinkle with her book," Mothball replied, darting his eyes at the colt. "But he's very sorry and won't do it again. Right?"

Zany grunted. "Yeah."

The changeling nodded and floated the book down to the little alicorn. "Here you go, Twinkle."

"Humph!" she huffed.

"Now, now, Twinkle Sparkle," Flash said, patting his daughter on the back. "Zany said he was sorry."

"Humph!" she said again, turning on her hoof with her nose in the air.

Flash gave Mothball a silent thanks before following her. Mothball glared back down at Zany.

"She started it," the colt grumbled.

"I don't wanna hear it," Mothball said, taking his hoof and dragging him over to Fluttershy. "Mom, I think Junior here wants a dance with you."

Fluttershy saw the grumpiness in her young son's face. "What he do this time?"

"Fight with Twinkle," the changeling explained.

"Again? Zany, how many times have I told you…?"

"I told him."

That didn't stop Fluttershy from starting a long lecture with her son. Mothball smiled a bit and left the two alone.

Zany was another thing he loved about his new life. The little tyke was like a brother to him, and Mothball had been around for so long that Zany considered him his big brother. Even though the chaotic colt would make mischief on several occasions, he was still fun to play with and at times, super adorable.

Mothball glanced between Fluttershy scolding Zany and Discord dancing with Screwball. The four had really become his family, much more than the changelings had ever been. And as he watched his beautiful Screwball, he couldn't argue that he belonged here.

That's when he made a decision that would change his life forever.

Zany was bouncing off the walls when they returned to the Castle of Chaos. It took both Discord and Screwball to catch him. Once the colt was calmed down, Fluttershy took him in her hooves and flew

him upstairs to put him to bed. Screwball yawned and decided she should get some sleep too. She hugged her father and kissed Mothball on the cheek before floating to her room.

For once, the changeling was grateful to be alone with Discord.

"Uh, Mr. Discord?" he asked with a twinge of nervousness. "Can I… can I ask you something important?"

Discord looked down at him with a neutral expression. It was not the first time Mothball had asked him for advice. Despite the continuing tension between them, Discord was the only older male figure in the boy's life, and he would sometimes come to him with things a son would ask his father.

"What the heck?" he shrugged, teleporting them both to the couch. "What you wanna talk about, kid?"

"Well," Mothball muttered, rubbing the back of his neck, "the wedding today got me thinking, and…now, I know you don't like me very much, sir, but…"

He took a deep breath.

"I want permission to marry your daughter."

He shut his eyes, expecting a scolding, or at least for the draconequus to summon a glass of water, drink it and spit it out. All he heard was silence.

Confused, Mothball opened one eye and was surprised to see Discord smirking.

"Well, it's about time!"

Mothball opened his other eye. "You mean you're not mad?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad? You're making a commitment to my daughter! What's more, you actually feel the need to *ask* me permission! If that's not a sign of a good son-in-law, I don't know what is!"

The changeling grinned hopefully. "So I can marry her?"

"But of course! Unless she says no, which I doubt. Why, I'll even give you a ring!"

He was about to snap his fingers when Mothball said, "Actually, I was hoping to buy one myself. You know how I've been working part-time at the perfume shop?"

Apple Blossom had recommended him for that job two years ago, when Discord had told him that he should work to build character. The job turned out to be perfect for him. Since changelings had an excellent sense of smell, he could tell the perfumes apart without even looking at the labels or opening the bottles.

"Well," he continued, "I haven't really done anything with the money I earned and it should be enough for a ring."

Discord blinked and then slapped Mothball on the back hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

"You, my boy, have earned my respect!"

Then Discord's face returned to its usual sternness as he leaned in closer. "But let's get one thing straight. You and my daughter are not to go any further than first base until *after* the wedding! Understand?!"

Mothball gulped and nodded. "Understood, sir."

"Good." The draconequus leaned back and smiled. "And you better make the proposal romantic! Otherwise she's never going to say yes! Well, unless you use three imprisoned princesses for leverage, but I wouldn't recommend that. So, uh…good luck, I guess."

The changeling grinned as he slid off the couch. "Thanks, Dad."

Discord's smile disappeared. "What was that?"

Mothball froze and bit his lip. "Uh…thanks…Mr. Discord?"

He turned to see the draconequus' expression. He couldn't tell if he

was shocked, displeased or touched. Maybe it was all three. Discord shook his head with a huff.

"Go to bed, kid."

Mothball complied with his command, but as soon as they were facing away from each other, they could no longer suppress their smiles.

General Mantis was searching the hive for his queen. She had been in seclusion for days and had only just discovered that she wasn't in her chamber. He came across one of the older parts of the hive on the lowest level. He passed by a large hexagonal doorway and stopped. He turned back and realized the crystalized barrier had been blasted through.

He pulled back the old, tattered black curtain and found the queen lying on a large, black canopy bed. The room was dusty and hadn't been visited for years, until now. The general couldn't see the queen's face, but he did see that she held something small in her hooves which he could not identify.

"Your majesty?" he spoke softly.

Chrysalis' head shot up and turned sharply to the general. Then she let out a sigh and placed her head back on the black pillow.

"Oh, General," she murmured. "It's only you."

General Mantis glanced around the bedroom. "My queen, is this where you've been for the past few days?"

She dodged his question with one of her own, "How long have you been my general, Mantis?"

He paused to ponder the answer. "Almost a thousand years, my queen."

"Ah, yes," she nodded. "Then you've seen it all. You see why I grieve."

He tilted his head. "What do you mean, my queen?"

"You remember who slept in this room. Don't worry about breaking the law, I won't punish you. But you remember. The first one had the ambition, but lacked the power. The second had the power, but lacked ambition."

She curled up into a ball. The general couldn't remember ever seeing the queen this…vulnerable.

"Now, after all these years," she muttered, "I still don't have an heir."

"There's still hope, my queen," General Mantis insisted. "There are plenty of fertile stallions out there for you to…"

"Three months."

He blinked. "Come again?"

She sat up and looked at him. In her eyes was something the general had never seen in all the years he had served her: fear.

"Three months, Mantis," she repeated in a cracked voice. "I haven't given birth in *three months* !"

The general stiffened at what she was implying. "It…it could just be a hiccup, your majesty. After all, three months isn't that long a…"

"YOU FOOL!" she bellowed, leaping off the bed and onto her hooves. "DON'T YOU REALIZE WHAT IS HAPPENING?! YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THAT WHEN A QUEEN LOSES HER FERTILITY…"

She stopped suddenly. The general gasped as her legs gave out. He flew over and caught her before she hit the floor. The color had drained from her face and her eyes were glazed over. They looked up wearily at the general.

"…she's no good anymore."

I'm not going to go into a lot of detail on the other OC's, because One: they are not the main focus of the story. Two: there are things from "CMC: The Next Generation" (the spin-off series of this universe) I don't want to spoil.

But I imagine some of you don't remember much from the last story since it's been so long. Rainbow Dash and Soarin have fraternal twins (Thunder and Lightning Dash) and a younger daughter named Prism (one of the main characters in the CMC series). Applejack and Spike have two adopted foals (Cinnamon Stick and Cinnamon Roll) as well as a biological foal (Applespike). Rarity and Fancy Pants have two daughters: Gemstone and Jewel (her birth occurred in the CMC series). Apple Blossom is Big Mac and Cheerilee's daughter.

And, um...yes. I named Twilight's daughter Twinkle Sparkle (don't kill me).

Anyway, I hope this time skip wasn't too confusing.

FYI, the Apple Tart in here is NOT the one mentioned in "Apple Family Reunion." I just couldn't think of an apple name. Consider it a family name.

Proposal

I can't guarantee daily updates. Remember, I'm in college.

Dinner at the Castle of Chaos would've looked peculiar to the average onlooker. Not only were four of the five creatures seated at the table unusual in appearance, but also in eating habits.

Discord had the diet of a goat and would eat almost anything. Tonight he was consuming a bowl of nails. Once it was emptied, he started chomping on the bowl.

Screwball's meal contained the four basic food groups: cotton candy, chocolate, donuts and ice cream. Her mother had thrown some lima beans in there so she would have something healthy, even though nutrition didn't seem to matter with her children.

Mothball, being a changeling, had little taste for regular food. The only things that seemed to satisfy him were sugary sweets, especially chocolate. So, as usual, his meal was a massive chocolate shake the size of his head.

Zany had an odd preference for nacho cheese. Since he had first tried it, he wouldn't have anything without it, which was how his mother got him to eat his vegetables.

Fluttershy, the only non-magical being in the household, was content with a simple garden salad.

"Captain Green Bean!" Zany exclaimed as he made a piece of broccoli float in midair. "The Great Orange Beast must be destroyed!"

He levitated a green bean and spoke in a deeper voice: "He cannot be stopped, Lieutenant Broccoli!"

"Roar!" Zany growled as he made a carrot appear in his bowl of

nacho cheese.

"Captain! The Beast! Oh, it's horrible!"

"Lieutenant! Attack!"

They fell into the bowl and emerged covered in the yellow goo.

"What's happening?" said Lieutenant Broccoli.

"Something's got us!" exclaimed Captain Green Bean. "Something even bigger than the Orange Beast!"

"What?"

"It's…the Prince of Chaos!"

"AAAAAAHHHH!"

The foal chomped down on the cheese covered vegetables with a smile on his face.

"Zany!" Fluttershy scolded. "How many times have I told you not to play with your food?!"

"Oh, let him have his fun, dear," Discord said, taking a bite out of his spoon. "At least he eats it after he plays with it. Remember when you tried to get Screwball to eat her vegetables?" He snickered. "She turned her celery into peppermint sticks!"

Mothball spat out some of his milkshake and laughed. Screwball scowled at him.

"I *hate* celery!" she declared. "It always gets stuck in my teeth."

"It's good for you, honey," Fluttershy insisted.

"Face it, darling," Discord said with a shrug. "They have your looks and my habits."

He popped the rest of his bowl into his mouth for emphasis.

Mothball glanced at Screwball and then at her empty dish.

"Hey, Mr. Discord?" he called to the other end of the table. "May I take Screwy out for a walk? I promise I'll keep her safe."

Screwball's eyes lit up and turned to her father. "Can we, Daddy? Please?"

Expecting an argument to arise, Fluttershy narrowed her eyes at her husband. To her surprise, Discord waved his paw nonchalantly.

"Of course. Go ahead, you crazy lovebirds. Just avoid the carnivorous beasts out there."

Mothball excitedly took Screwball's hoof and led her outside. Fluttershy looked up at her husband in awe.

"I'm impressed," she admitted. "It's nice to see that you finally trust the two of them alone."

Discord crossed his arms. "Oh no, you kidding? I'm totally following them."

Mothball and Screwball were unafraid of the Everfree Forest. Part of it was due to the fact that the Castle of Chaos was in the middle of it. The main reason was that if a carnivorous beast appeared, Screwball could turn it into something nonthreatening or Mothball could turn into something even more threatening.

"So," Screwball said with a grin, "you build me another snow pony?"

Mothball chuckled at the mention of his first Hearth's Warming gift to her. "Get real. You're the one who can conjure up snow in this time of year."

"True. But you've got something planned, right? I know that look of yours. So what is it?"

"Oh, you'll see."

They reached a clearing containing a brown lake, the chocolate lake Screwball had made when she was a foal.

"Where we first met," Screwball thought aloud.

Mothball glanced at her and smiled. "The day I met the most beautiful pony in all of Equestria."

She giggled and nudged his shoulder. "You flatterer."

"I'm serious. I actually felt my heartbeat, though I didn't know what it was at the time." He chuckled. "When I saw you on that lake, playing in that pirate ship…"

"Hey, that gives me an idea!"

A wooden rowboat appeared on the lake. Screwball floated into it and held out her hoof.

"Come on!"

Mothball was a little annoyed for being interrupted, but he couldn't help but smirk at Screwball's playfulness. He hovered over and sat across from her. He glanced around the boat.

"Where are the oars?"

Screwball giggled as the boat started moving by itself. "We don't need oars."

"Right."

She looked up at the starry sky. "Beautiful night, huh?"

He followed her gaze. "Yeah."

It's the perfect moment , he thought. He looked back at Screwy and then silently used his magic to summon something from home. A black box appeared in his hoof behind his back. He took a deep breath.

Here it goes.

"Screwy?"

Her eyes locked onto his. "Yeah?"

For a moment, Mothball was speechless as he once again got lost in those infinite swirls. Then he shook himself back to his senses, reminding himself why he was here. He put down the box and took Screwball's hooves in his.

"The day I met you," he began, "was the happiest day of my life. You were the pony who showed me how to have fun, the one who saw the good in me even when I didn't. I always thought I was a heartless creature, but you…"

He trailed off when he thought he heard music. He shook it off and continued his speech.

"You showed me otherwise. As if that wasn't enough, by taking me into your home, you've given me the family I've always wanted. There's no other way I can repay that than…"

He stopped again when the music grew louder and fireflies started swarming around them. The lake was suddenly blue and illuminated by the glowing insects. He looked back up at Screwball in confusion. She narrowed her eyes impatiently.

"Well, are ya gonna ask me or not?"

Mothball blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I've given you the perfect opportunity, so ask me."

"How did you…?"

"ASK ME TO MARRY YOU ALREADY!"

The changeling flinched at the volume of her voice but couldn't resist smiling at how cute she looked when angry.

"Right." He levitated the box and brought it between them. "Now, as I was saying, what better way can I repay you than making us officially family?"

He opened the box and Screwball put her hooves to her mouth in a gasp. The ring was gold, with a purple jewel that matched her eyes.

"Will you marry me, Screwy?" Mothball said with a blush.

The ring floated out of the box and onto Screwball's hoof. She held it up in front of her to admire the jewel and looked slyly back at the changeling.

"What do *you* think, Lover Boy?"

Mothball grinned hopefully. "Yes?"

He gasped as she gripped his chest and brought him close.

"Heck, yeah!" she exclaimed before pressing her lips to his.

Mothball moaned blissfully as he closed his eyes and kissed her back. He remembered how he used to be so hesitant to kiss her, worried that he would hurt her. Now, as he felt her love transferring to him and his love pouring into her, he knew that kissing her only made the two of them stronger.

"Ew, gross!"

The newly engaged couple pulled apart and saw Screwball's family standing in the bushes. Zany was about to gag, Fluttershy had tears in her eyes while Discord was glaring furiously at Mothball.

"So much for privacy," the changeling muttered.

Screwball smirked. "I wouldn't be too sure."

There was a flash and Discord, Fluttershy and Zany found themselves back at the castle.

"Did…" Discord uttered, "did she just…?"

"I think they wanna be left alone, honey," Fluttershy giggled.

That night, as Fluttershy climbed into bed, she noticed the blank look on her husband's face as he stared up at the canopy.

"You're not upset about our daughter getting married, are you?" she

asked.

"What?" Discord responded. "Oh, no! I mean Mothball's a good kid, right? Anyone who gives up their crown for love would make a fine son-in-law, right?"

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "Then what's the matter?"

He gulped. "Well…it's just…he…he's terrible at proposals!"

His wife huffed. "To be fair, *your* proposal wasn't exactly romantic either!"

Discord sat up. "Hey, I made up for it, didn't I? Besides, what does it matter how we got engaged? We're happy now, aren't we?"

"Then why criticize our daughter's engagement?"

He opened his mouth and then paused. He grunted as he lay back down.

"Touché, my dear. Still, what kind of stallion is he to let the mare take over the proposal?"

Fluttershy turned her head and scowled at him. " *Excuse* me?! Mares can be just as romantic as stallions!"

"Oh, really?" Discord smirked. "Because if you're going to use us as an example, then you're out of luck. When we first met, you couldn't look ponies in the eye, let alone say 'I love you!'"

"I still could've proposed if I wanted to!"

"Is that so? How, exactly?"

Fluttershy smiled as she scooted closer to him. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe something like…this?"

Discord shivered as she ran her hoof up his eagle arm. It snaked its way around his neck, bringing their faces closer.

"And then I would lean in," she whispered, her breath caressing his

ear, "and ask: 'Will you marry me?'"

Discord sighed. "That would definitely do it. But," he pulled away, "you wouldn't have had the guts back then!"

Fluttershy scowled and turned away from him.

"Oh, don't be like that, darling," Discord purred, laying his claw on her shoulder. "You know I love you, and would've married you no matter who proposed."

His wife sighed as she rolled onto her back to look up at him. "Whether I said yes or not, it would seem."

Discord shook his head. "From the beginning, I wanted my bride to marry me willingly. I never said it had to be *you* ."

"So you would've just taken any run-of-the-mill pony?"

"Now, sweetie…"

"I'm serious, Discord. Suppose some pony else went instead of me. Would you have fallen for her instead?"

She gasped as his tail wrapped around her middle and she was lifted toward him. His face was only a breath away, his eyes staring sincerely into hers.

"If some pony else had come," Discord whispered, "I would've married her regardless. But would I have fallen in love with her? I don't think so. So few creatures have affected me, Fluttershy, but you…" He stroked her face with his paw. "You're the only one who will ever capture my heart."

Fluttershy closed her eyes with a content sigh as he brought her lips to his. Then he looked at her with a smirk.

"Now what about you, missy? Would you have married some pony else if not me?"

Fluttershy blinked and then grinned slyly. "Like you said: I wouldn't have had the guts."

"Oh, ho, ho, but anyone could've easily gone and snatched you up. After all, when I saw you singing onstage at the Grand Galloping Gala…"

He whispered in her ear. "You were like a siren calling out to my soul."

Fluttershy giggled as his paw slid down her back. "Discord, the kids…"

Discord kissed her cheek before saying, "That's why the room is soundproof, my dear."

"Hey, you awake?"

Mothball groaned at the sound of Screwball's voice. "Am now."

He opened his eyes to see her smiling above him, not wearing her hat. He was used to her coming in here, as the only alone time they could get together was when Discord was asleep, which raised the question:

"He won't catch you?"

Screwball shook her head as she slid under the covers. "Nah. He and Mom are a little…" she blushed, " *busy* at the moment."

Mothball's eyes widened. "You weren't… *spying* on them, were you?"

"Ew, gross! No, I know 'cuz Daddy just soundproofed the room."

"Wow," he mouthed. "And to think he doesn't trust me with you."

"I know, right? Even when we *do* get around his rules, it's not like we're doing anything naughty." She huffed. "Like I'm totally oblivious to what he and Mom do eight times a week!"

She scooted closer to the changeling and laid her hoof across his chest. Mothball smiled and put his hoof around her. Things never

really went further than this whenever they spent the night together. They didn't want things to get too intense and have Discord walk in on them. No use getting him madder. They were satisfied with just holding each other, finding bliss in each other's warmth. They never spent the whole night together, in case Discord found them in the morning, so Screwball would wait until Mothball fell asleep and then leave.

"So," she whispered, "when are we gonna have the wedding?"

Mothball chuckled, somehow knowing she was going to want to discuss that.

"Your mom asked the same thing," he replied, "and I really don't care."

"We should wait until Thunder Dash and Apple Blossom get back from their honeymoon before making plans. After all, Blossom is gonna be one of my bridesmaids and I know Thunder will wanna be one of your groomstallions. By the way, who you gonna have as your best mare or stallion?"

Mothball stiffened. "I…I hadn't thought about that. I mean Thunder and Cinnamon Stick are the only guy friends I have and I'd hate to have to choose between them."

"You could always borrow Dinky or something."

"Nah, Dinky's been your best bud since birth. It wouldn't seem right."

"Well, we'll figure that out later. Where are we gonna have it, anyway?"

"I don't know. Canterlot?"

"Nah, too sophisticated."

"Sweet Apple Acres?"

"Not sophisticated enough."

"We could have it in the garden."

"Maybe. Still not sure…"

He squeezed her shoulder. "We have plenty of time to figure it out."

Screwball sighed as she gazed at the purple diamond on her hoof. "I can't believe it. We're actually doing this."

"Yeah," Mothball sighed.

"We're actually starting our lives together. We're gonna be a real family." She looked up at the ceiling in thought. "What do you suppose our kids are gonna be like?"

"WHAT?!"

The changeling jumped and would've fallen out of bed had Screwball not caught him.

"K-kids?" he panted. "But…it's kinda…we just…"

"Hold your horses, Mothy. I only brought it up because with you being a changeling and me being the daughter of chaos, would our kids have your powers or mine? Or both?" Her eyes twinkled in excitement. "Wow, that would be so cool!"

Mothball laughed nervously. "M-maybe we should take this one step at a time. I mean…k-kids are a big…big thing and…"

He frowned as a new thought occurred to him: *Would we even be able to have them?*

Only royal changelings could reproduce, though males couldn't do it on their own, which was why they usually acquired queens. He knew his father was a stallion his mother had seduced, but could male royals breed with ponies?

"Hey," Screwball said softly, "we don't need to think about that for a while. Right now, let's just sleep."

"Yeah," Mothball muttered as he slowly fell back on the bed. "Sleep."

Just outside the castle grounds, two armored changelings were slowly approaching, one in dark green, the other in dark blue. The one in green gazed up in awe at the castle.

"This is the place, General?"

The one in blue nodded. "This is it, Lieutenant."

"Wow. You gotta commend Discord on his exterior design."

"We're not here to admire the infrastructure, Lieutenant! We have a job to do!"

The lieutenant shook out of his daze. "Right. So how do we know which room's the prince's?"

"We smell for him, of course."

The soldiers pressed onward, but some invisible force threw them back.

"What the…?" the lieutenant exclaimed.

General Mantis stuck out his hoof and the castle rippled before them. "A force field. Figures. How else would this family be able to live in the Everfree Forest without any unwanted intrusions?"

"So how do we get in?"

"We won't," the general smirked. "We'll just have to lure the prince out."

He took the form of Screwball and the lieutenant let out a snicker.

"You look pretty good as a girl, Boss."

The general rolled his eyes and muttered in Screwball's voice: "Rookie."

Meanwhile, Mothball was alone in his bed. Screwball had left the minute he fell asleep and returned to her room.

"Moooothbaaaaaaall!"

The changeling's eyes opened at the sound of his beloved's voice. He looked at the empty space beside him.

"Screwy?"

"Moooothbaaaaaaall!"

Curious, Mothball rose to his hooves and went to the window. He saw Screwball hovering at the edge of the garden, waving at him. She gestured for him to come over. He shook his head and chuckled.

"What's she up to this time?"

Screwball disappeared into the trees, so Mothball flew down to follow her. As he approached the forest, he called out to her:

"Screwy? Screwy, what you up to? We'll get in so much trouble if your dad…"

He stopped as he caught a whiff of something. He lifted his nose and sniffed the air.

Mustard.

"Uh oh."

Mothball was about to fly out of there when he was blasted by two green beams. Before he knew it, he was encased in a cocoon. Through the green coating he could see the faces of two changeling soldiers, one he recognized as General Mantis.

"Nice to see you again, your highness," the general greeted. "Sorry for the hostility, but you'll understand our reasons once we get back to the hive."

Mothball gasped and banged against the cocoon. "No! I'm not going back there!"

The soldiers ignored his protests as they levitated the chrysalis and

began carrying him.

"No! General Mantis, let me out! Help! SCREWY!"

Even though his cries were muffled by his prison, and he was far away from the castle, his fiancée heard him. Her ear twitched as her chaotic hearing picked up the sound. She jumped out of bed and raced to the window. She caught a glimpse of the two changelings carrying her beloved off.

Screwball narrowed her eyes and put on her propeller hat. "Oh no, they didn't!"

The changelings gasped in surprise when the chaotic pony appeared in their path.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!" she boomed. "GET AWAY FROM MY FIANCÉ!"

She screamed so loud that the soldiers fell over. Screwball ran to Mothball's side and blasted a hole in the cocoon. He gasped in relief as she lifted him out.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Fine," he wheezed.

At this point, the soldiers were back on their hooves, their glowing horns pointed at the couple.

"Step away from the prince, girl!" General Mantis commanded.

Screwball glared at the general, her eyes glowing dangerously. "Just try me."

"What is going on here?" Mothball demanded. "Why are you bringing me back to the hive?"

"So you can be our king, of course!" the lieutenant replied.

The couple turned to him in shock. "What?!"

"You fool!" the general exclaimed. "We weren't supposed to reveal that until we were back at the hive!"

"K-k-king?" Mothball stammered. "M-me?"

"But why?" Screwball questioned. "I mean…don't you already have a leader? What about Chrysalis?"

The soldiers exchanged a sorrowful glance. This surprised both Screwball and Mothball, as neither of them had seen sadness in other changelings. It scared them.

General Mantis hung his head before responding.

"Her majesty is dying."

Dun, dun, DUN!

I was gonna have a big cheesy proposal, but I decided to make it comic. Oh yeah, and FLUTTERCORD FOREVER!

Welcome Home, Your Highness

Nothing to really say about this chapter, just that I'm surprised with how much feedback this story's gotten so far. Over a hundred reviews and this hasn't been up for a week yet. Wow.

As Spitfire would say: "That's an academy record."

Mothball and Screwball were speechless, neither of them sure how to respond.

"M-mother is…" the prince stammered, "d-dying?"

General Mantis nodded solemnly.

"B-but…how? I mean she's only…"

"A thousand and three?" Screwball muttered.

"It happens to every changeling queen," Mantis explained. "They have extended lifespans, but there comes a time when the power they've gained over their lifetime runs out. First she loses her ability to reproduce, and then she eventually withers and…"

He choked on his words, unable to continue.

"That's why we need the prince back," said the lieutenant. "Her majesty only has a few days left, a week at most. We need someone to take her place."

"But Mothy's a traitor," Screwball pointed out. "He left you guys. Why would you want *him* as your king?"

"Because he's the only royal changeling there is," Mantis replied.

"Well," the lieutenant shrugged, "aside from…"

"Shush!" the general hissed.

Mothball raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Lieutenant Bombus meant to say 'aside from our queen.'"

"But…"

The lieutenant paused when his superior gave him a warning glare.

"Uh, right!" Bombus piped. "Aside from our queen! You know, until she dies and…"

"They get it!" Mantis snapped. "The point is that despite Prince Mothball's past treachery, he is still heir to the throne and must return to the hive."

Screwball scowled as she stood protectively in front of her fiancé. "Heir to the throne or not, Mothball's not going anywhere with you!"

"You don't understand the gravity of this situation, girl!"

"Gravity, *schmavity* ! I *defy* gravity!"

"Screwy, he's right," Mothball whispered.

She turned to him in disbelief. "Excuse me?"

"Just let him explain."

"Thank you, your highness," Mantis huffed, still glaring at Screwball. "The changelings must always have a royal in charge, as they are the only ones that can reproduce. The prince must keep the changeling line going. If not, then our species will eventually become extinct."

Screwball's expression softened as she looked back at Mothball. "Is this true?"

The prince nodded. "The changelings must always have a ruler."

As much as she disliked the changelings, Screwball knew Mothball wouldn't want to be responsible for their extinction. He'd be the only one left of his kind, and she knew how difficult that could be for

someone.

"Hey, nice gem!" Lieutenant Bombus exclaimed when he noticed Screwball's ring. "So you two engaged now?"

"Err, yeah," Screwball uttered.

"Good! Then we'll have a new queen already!"

"WHAT?!" She turned to her fiancé. "Mothy, what's he talking about?"

Mothball rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Well, uh…you see…while male royals are fertile, they…they can't give birth."

She tilted her head. "Then what exactly were you planning to do once you took the throne?"

The prince bit his lip. He *really* didn't want to talk about changeling reproduction with his fiancée right now.

"Well…my mother told me that I had to find a queen, and…well…"

Her spiral eyes widened. "Are you *serious* ?! Me, Queen of the Changelings?! My dad'll kill me! After he kills *you* !"

"Uh, there's one more little thing you should know…"

"There's *more* ?!"

"See, the queen also has to be able to reproduce…" he gulped, "asexually. And she has to be able to give birth to a whole colony, and the only way for her to do that is if she's…a changeling."

Screwball blinked. "What are you saying?"

He looked down as he rubbed his hooves together awkwardly. "If…if you want to be my queen, you'll have to…you'll have to…" He gulped again and said the next sentence quickly. "You'll have to be turned into a changeling."

He shut his eyes so he wouldn't see her reaction.

"WHAT?!"

"Why couldn't *you* guys have told her?" Mothball muttered to the soldiers.

"But I…me…changeling…how do you even *do* that?!"

"It's a very delicate procedure," Mantis explained, "and is only done under the direst of circumstances. It can only be used on a pony, however, since they are the closest to our species."

She crossed her hooves as she glared at the general. "If that's true, then why are you wasting time with Mothball when you can just turn some random pony into your queen?!"

"Because the spell can only be cast by a royal," Bombus answered. "I mean come on. Don't you think we'd have a lot more royals if any old changeling could make one?"

"And her majesty is too weak to cast it," Mantis added.

"It's been five years since Mothball left," Screwball pointed out. "If she needed an heir so bad, why didn't she try doing something like that before?"

"That is none of your concern. Look, we don't have time to argue. Whether the prince accepts it, the queen demands his presence. If you don't wish to part with your fiancé, Miss Screwball, you are welcome to be our next queen." The general said this with a groan. "If not, then I suggest you leave and let us carry out our orders."

Screwball put her hoof around Mothball. "Where he's going, I'm going. Besides, I'd like a talk with this queen of yours."

The general sighed. "So be it, then. Follow us."

The soldiers' wings buzzed as they took to the skies. Mothball looked at Screwball worriedly.

"Screwy, you don't know what you're getting into. The changelings…"

"You just let *me* handle them," she said firmly. "We'll get this sorted out even if I have to flood the hive with chocolate milk!"

She floated up to the soldiers and Mothball sighed as he followed her. He had learned over the years that there was no use arguing with the Princess of Chaos. It was a lost cause.

The first half hour of the flight was spent in awkward silence. General Mantis and Screwball kept glancing at each other in disdain, Lieutenant Bombus was too afraid to speak and that he might anger his boss, and Mothball was deep in thought as he watched the ground.

Eventually, the prince looked up at his fiancée and asked a question that had been plaguing him since the beginning of the journey.

"Hey, uh…would you…would you really hate being Queen of the Changelings?"

"Well," Screwball groaned, darting her eyes at Mantis, "black isn't exactly my color."

Mothball spoke in a whisper, "Even if you'd be *my* queen?"

Her expression softened as she turned to look at him. "Oh. Oh, Mothy, I didn't mean it like *that* !"

"No, I get it. I wouldn't want that for you either. After all, *I* never really wanted to become King. Besides," he gave her a small smile, "I like you just the way you are."

Screwball smiled back and then frowned. "How you feeling, by the way? You know, about your mom?"

He sighed and looked back down. "I don't know. I mean…sure, she's not the best mom in the world, but…she's still my mom."

She nodded. "I get that. I'd be upset if one of my parents…I mean you saw what happened at the big battle…"

Thanks to your mother , she finished in her head.

"I just never thought…" Mothball stammered, his lip quivering. "I mean she's lived for such a long time and…"

She laid her hoof on his back. "It'll be okay. We'll get through this." She decided to change the subject. "You know, I've never been to the hive before. Aunt Twilight told me it's like this dark castle with surprises behind every door! Talk about chaotic!"

"You're thinking of our old temporary home in the Forest of Leota," the general interjected. "That was shortly after our…defeat in Canterlot. After Twilight Sparkle and her friends foiled our plans," he coughed, "yet again, we had to move base back to our old hive, which we still occupy today."

"Oh, good," Screwball sighed. "I was worried we were gonna be flying for hours, 'cuz the Forest of Leota's *super* far away!"

"Actually, we're almost there!" Bombus piped.

She glanced down and saw that they were flying over a forest of black, leafless trees that might as well have been dead.

"Sheesh," Screwball cringed. "The Everfree is livelier than this."

"Now you know why we usually hunt outside our land," the general grunted.

Screwball looked back up and gasped. "Holy moly!"

What she saw was a giant green beehive structure with tall, lopsided towers sticking out of the top.

"Sweet chocolate bunnies, that thing is huge!" she exclaimed.

General Mantis rolled his eyes. "What'd you expect from a colony made up of twenty thousand changelings?"

Her eyes widened as she turned to Mothball. "Geez, your mom's been busy."

The entrance was guarded by two soldier changelings in green armor. At the sight of Mothball, they bowed their heads begrudgingly.

"Your highness," they muttered.

Mothball cringed nervously as he passed between them. When Screwball tried to follow, she was blocked by the guards' spears.

"At ease, boys," the general ordered. "She's with us." He grunted. "Unfortunately."

The soldiers groaned as they placed their weapons in their upright positions.

"Think they remember me?" Screwball whispered to her fiancé.

The guards hissed as she went past.

"Probably," Mothball muttered.

Screwball gawked at the interior of the hive. The walls contained thousands of hexagonal alcoves resembling honeycombs, changelings of all shapes and sizes bustling from here to there. In the center was a narrow green tower that she figured to be the queen's quarters.

"Wow," Screwball uttered. "No wonder you call this place a hive." She touched the green wall. "What is this stuff made of, anyway?"

"Crystalized mucus," Lieutenant Bombus replied.

"EW!" she cried, retracting her hoof in disgust. "Is that the same green stuff you guys use all the time?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

She looked at Mothball in disbelief.

"There are some things about me that are better left unsaid," he murmured.

"Let's move along, shall we?" General Mantis demanded.

He led the group to the center of the hive and held up his deformed hoof.

"Wait here."

He slowly opened the dark green door and shut it quietly. After a minute, he opened it again.

"Her majesty will see you now."

Screwball took Mothball's hoof. "You ready?"

He took a deep breath. "Yeah."

They walked through the doorway together and the sight made Mothball sick to his stomach.

Chrysalis was lying in her black, king-sized canopy bed, several changelings keeping vigil at her side. They ranged from drones to nurses to soldiers to workers. Mothball rarely saw his mother without her crown. It was sitting on the table beside her. Her black skin was pale, her cobweb-like mane was practically cobwebs now as it spread lifelessly across the pillow, and her hooves lay heavily on her stomach.

Even Screwball was uneasy as they slowly approached the bed. Neither of them had ever seen the queen so…vulnerable.

"My queen?" Mantis whispered. "Your son."

Her eyelids slowly lifted and a lump formed in Mothball's throat. The eyes that used to strike fear in ponies' hearts were now glassy and devoid of emotion. She sluggishly turned her head to look at him.

"Ah, my son," she said, her voice weak and cracked. "So you've come home. My, how you've grown."

"Mother?" Mothball uttered. "What…what happened to you?"

She shrugged slightly. "My time, I guess." She lifted her head

slightly as she caught sight of Screwball and growled at her. "I see you've brought the halfling with you."

Screwball scowled. "Nice to see you too, Chrysalis."

"So you two are still together?" The queen's eyes moved to the ring on Screwball's hoof. "Oh, and I see you've take your relationship a step further. Well, well, well. It will certainly be interesting to see a changeling queen with chaotic powers. Shame I won't live to see that."

"Listen, you!" Screwball hollered, holding up her hoof. "I wouldn't be Queen of your disgusting race even if…"

Some of the changelings hissed at her threatening tone. Mothball grabbed her hoof and whispered:

"Screwy, we need to talk."

He dragged her away from the bed. She stared at him in disbelief.

"You're not actually gonna stand for this, are you?" she demanded.

"They resent you enough already," Mothball warned, glancing back at the changelings. "No use making it worse."

"But…"

"Hey, I've had to put up with *your* family! Now you have to put up with mine! Just let me do the talking."

She looked at the changelings and then back at him. Eventually, she sighed in defeat.

"Fine."

They returned to the queen's bedside, Screwball staying behind her fiancé. Mothball took a deep breath and faced his mother.

"I don't want to be King, Mother."

Chrysalis groaned. "I didn't think you would. You were always weak-

minded. Pity. You were such a talented young changeling. Why, you were turning into adult ponies by your fourteenth year. Unfortunately, I was unable to produce a new heir. It would be best if you accept the throne, son. You wouldn't want to bring an entire species to extinction, would you?"

"Don't try to guilt trip me! I'm aware of what's at stake, here, Mother."

"My, my, my. You've certainly gotten more assertive since you left. You sure you don't want the throne? I'll even give you my blessing to marry the spawn of chaos."

"I'm not changing anything about Screwy just so we can get married!"

"Well, the options are that you turn her into a changeling and marry her, or marry some pony else. Either way, you'll have to be King."

Screwball tapped Mothball's shoulder and whispered, "Is she serious? Is there really no way around this?"

"I'm afraid so," the prince sighed. "After all, I'm the only royal left."

"Well," Chrysalis sneered. "That's not necessarily true."

The couple turned to her with wide eyes.

"What?" Mothball choked.

"My queen?" Mantis questioned, panic rising within his face. "You sure?"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, General," Chrysalis said as she cranked her head towards her son. "I'm afraid I've kept a little secret from you, my son. You see, you're not the only royal changeling I've given birth to. Before you arrived, I had another heir."

Mothball blinked. "What? Why haven't I heard of this?"

"I forbade anyone to speak of her, as I had done for you when you betrayed us."

"Her?"

"Your sister, Princess Bellatrix."

No, she does not mean LeStrange! Though that IS where I got the name.

Sorry to cut it off there but considering how much I want to put in this, I thought this was a good place to end the chapter.

In case you're confused, that whole thing about the Forest of Leota was in the "Return of Queen Chrysalis" arc in the MLP comics. I didn't discover this until after I had finished DOD and realized that alternate universe or not, this still would've happened. So there's my explanation for why the changelings aren't still in that castle.

The Lost Heir

Okay, I'll admit it. The whole "finding next heir" premise was borrowed from *Shrek the Third* (hey, another threequel!) but I promise you it's not gonna follow that plot in its entirety.

"I have a sister?!" Mothball asked in disbelief.

"Hey!" all the female changelings present exclaimed.

"Sorry. I mean a *royal* sister?"

"Yes," Chrysalis sighed as she stared up at the black canopy. "Bellatrix. Now that girl had spunk, something every queen should have. She would always go on and on about what she would do when she was queen, and would practice her magic whenever possible. Unfortunately, she didn't have the power you had, my son. When you were twelve, you could turn into a fly. When she was twelve, she couldn't even turn into an earth filly!"

Screwball looked at Mothball questioningly.

"It's harder than other pony forms, 'cuz you have to hide your wings and horn," he explained.

"She couldn't even control minds like you," Chrysalis continued.

"You have mind-control powers?" Screwball inquired.

"It's not like I ever use it," Mothball murmured.

"Exactly!" Chrysalis exclaimed. "That was always the problem with you, Mothball! You have so much power, yet refuse to use it! It was the opposite with Bellatrix. She would show off her power all the time, not that there was much to show off. She also wasn't very clever, and would have a hard time getting food because she couldn't make ponies love her enough." She groaned. "Couldn't

blame them. There wasn't much to love. I suppose she got that quality from her father, whoever it was."

Screwball raised an eyebrow. Chrysalis rolled her eyes in response.

"I was very active at the time."

"So what happened to Princess Not-Lovable?" the chaotic pony asked.

"When she was eighteen, she had made little improvement, so I decided to give her a challenge. I thought some time outside the hive would build up her strength, so I banished her for five years."

Screwball snorted. "Well, aren't *you* Mother of the Year?"

"But that was before I was born, right?" Mothball questioned. "Why didn't she come back?"

"Oh, she did," Chrysalis replied. "You had just been born, actually. Frankly, your sister became jealous of you. Also, her time in the outside world had apparently made her weaker. She wouldn't stop talking about 'friendship' and how there were 'more important things than power.' So she left again, this time on her own accord. Since I had you to replace her, I thought nothing of it then."

"So where is this Bellatrix now?" asked Screwball.

The queen shrugged. "Don't know. Haven't seen or heard from her in ten years. She could be dead for all I know."

"Ten years?" Mothball said. "But I thought you said she came back when I was born."

"Oh, she came back again, to…ask a favor."

"But I was twelve then. I would've seen her!"

"You would have, but you were otherwise…" she darted her eyes at Screwball, "occupied."

The chaotic pony shrugged. "What are the odds?"

"That was the last time I saw her. She could be anywhere now, using a different name, a different body…"

"So say this Princess Bellatrix is still out there," Screwball said, "do you think she'd be up for taking the throne instead of Mothball?"

Chrysalis gazed back up in thought. "Our last meeting wasn't very… pleasant, but she'd certainly want the throne more than you, son. I still think she'd make a poor ruler, but at least she's not as much a goody-goody as you. However, even if she is alive, you'd have a hard time finding her, even with your changeling nostrils."

"She's right," Mothball nodded. "Finding a disguised changeling princess in Equestria would be like finding a needle in a haystack."

"But if we *do* find her," said Screwball, "and she *does* agree to take the throne, then Mothball's off the hook, right?"

"Whatever," Chrysalis groaned. "The changelings need a ruler, no matter who it is. Of course, you'll have to find her quickly."

"Why?" Mothball asked.

"Because I'm *dying* you imbecile!" the queen boomed, sitting up. "I have to give the royal blessing! The title is not official until I do!"

She coughed as she lay back down. General Mantis was immediately at her side.

"Take it easy, my queen," he whispered.

"Great!" Screwball exclaimed, turning to her fiancé. "So we just have to find this Bellatrix, demand that she takes the throne and we can get married with no strings attached!"

"But how are we going to do that?" Mothball questioned. "She could be anywhere!"

"I have no idea!"

"Ooh!" Lieutenant Bombus piped. "Maybe you can find a clue in her room!"

"Bombus!" Mantis bellowed.

"No, General," Chrysalis moaned. "He's right."

"But my queen, you forbade…"

"I know what I forbade! But I'm at Death's door, General. Show them to Bellatrix's room."

The general sighed. "Lieutenant, escort the prince and his," he grunted, "fiancée to the princess' chamber."

Bombus saluted and gestured for the couple to follow him. Screwball took Mothball's hoof.

"We'll find your sister," she whispered, "and all of this will be over."

Chrysalis sighed as she watched them leave.

"They remind me so much…" she whispered.

"Remind you of what, your majesty?" Mantis inquired.

"So much…so much…"

"You should rest, my queen," the general said, setting her head down. "You've been through a lot."

Before she drifted off to sleep, one word escaped her lips:

"Discord…"

It was Chrysalis' twelfth birthday and she was out on her first hunt. She was flying over the lifeless trees as she scanned the ground. So far, she hadn't had much luck in finding prey, as not many creatures dwelled within the Changeling Forest, for obvious reasons.

Then she spotted a brown speck on the ground and slowly floated down to find that it was a strange creature the size of a small pony, but it didn't look like one. It had the gray head of a pony with a black mane going down its neck and a white mop at the top, but the rest of

its long, brown body was made up of many different types of animals.

Curious, Chrysalis perched herself on a branch and watched the strange little beast. It was staring at its reflection in a puddle. The sadness in its face made her heart swell in sympathy.

Poor little guy…

She shook the thought out of her head. She was on a hunt, and it was her job to feed off other creatures' emotions. Her mother, Queen Arachne, had told her not to return until she had gained enough power to feed an army. So she used the spell her mother had taught her to peer into the creature's heart and see who it loved, as love was the strongest emotion for a changeling to feed on. Her eyes widened in surprise at what she saw.

Nothing. There was no one the creature loved.

She was so stunned that she didn't hear the branch crack, but the creature did. It jumped up and searched from left to right.

"Who's there?" it called in a male teenage voice.

Chrysalis gasped when a baseball bat appeared out of nowhere. She stepped forward to see if her eyes were deceiving her, but putting her weight on the branch made it snap. She let out a shriek as she plummeted to the ground.

She groaned in pain as she opened her eyes. They were met with a pair of yellow ones with red pupils. She yelped at the fact that she had been caught and quickly changed form. It was too late though. He had already seen her.

When she turned back at his request, he was surprisingly…unafraid.

The creature was a draconequus named Discord, and he interested the young changeling princess. He was so strange, and the fact that there was no one he loved intrigued her. She became even more impressed once she realized he had powers beyond belief.

And though she was reluctant to admit it, he was sort of…cute. In a

chaotic way.

When she heard he didn't have a place to stay, she had the strangest feeling that it was her duty to help him. Maybe it was because he had said he was all alone in the world. Despite the fact that she was a princess with a thousand half-siblings, Chrysalis sometimes felt that way too. She rarely left the hive, and her mother didn't want her playing with the other changeling children, as she was "above" them.

But this young creature was just as powerful as she was, maybe even more. Perhaps that factor would make her mother allow her to keep him as a playmate? Or at least a pet?

Either way, she asked him to come back to the hive with her.

"Why?" he questioned.

Chrysalis wasn't sure why, but she wanted to help Discord, to learn more about him.

She shrugged. "That's what friends do?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "We're friends?"

She held out her hoof. "Sure. Why not?"

She really had no better explanation, and the thought made her smile. He looked at her hoof with uncertainty.

"Come on," she urged. "Would I steer you wrong?"

He stared at her for another minute before slowly taking her hoof. "I really don't know the answer to that, but I've got no other option."

Chrysalis giggled like a giddy school filly as she dragged him to the hive. The guards at the entrance raised their eyebrows as the princess walked through with a strange creature, but she didn't pay them any heed.

"Mother, Mother!" she called. "Look what I found!"

A tall changeling resembling Chrysalis, but with green hair, was conversing with one of her lieutenants. Her head turned at the sound of her daughter's voice. She hissed when she caught sight of Discord.

"What is *that* ?!"

"Whoa," Discord uttered as he gazed up at the changeling queen. "You're tall. You're like one of those dead trees out there."

The queen growled as her horn glowed green. "Why, you little…"

"Mother, wait!" Chrysalis exclaimed, standing between them. "He's a friend!"

Queen Arachne's horn dimmed as she looked questioningly at her daughter. "Friend?"

"Yeah! His name is Discord! He's a…drakoki…drakani…a whatever! I found him out in the forest! Anyway, he needs a place to stay, so I brought him here!"

Her mother blinked in confusion and then scowled. "Chrysalis, I sent you out there to *hunt* ! Not to *make friends* !"

"Please, please, *please* , Mother? Can we keep him? I promise he'll make himself useful! Discord, show her that trick of yours!"

The young draconequus smiled and snapped his talons. Arachne gasped when a small pink cloud appeared and started pouring brown rain.

"How did…how…?"

Then her lips curled into an evil grin. "Oh, I see. He's too powerful for you to consume on your own, so you brought him back so we could all have a snack, hmm?"

"What?" Discord squeaked.

"No, no, no, Mother!" Chrysalis insisted. "I didn't bring him for you to drain! Besides, even if I did, it would be impossible, because he

doesn't love anybody!"

Arachne's smile vanished and she squinted at Discord. After a few seconds, her eyes widened. She looked sternly at her daughter.

"Dearest," she spoke in a low voice, "might I speak with you in private?"

Chrysalis put her hooves behind her back nervously. It was never good when her mother spoke in that tone.

"Yes, Mother," she murmured.

The queen turned to her lieutenant. "Make sure that *thing* doesn't cause any trouble."

The lieutenant saluted and went to Discord's side.

"I'll be right back," Chrysalis whispered to him before following her mother to the tower.

As Arachne shut the door, she turned coldly toward her daughter.

"That thing can't stay here."

"But mother…" Chrysalis started to protest.

The queen held up her hoof. "No! He has no emotion for us to feed on. What good is his power if we have no way to consume it?"

"Maybe we don't need his power! Can't we just keep him the way he is? I mean he has no place to go."

Arachne arched an eyebrow. "Why are you so concerned for this creature?"

"Well…" The princess looked down at her hooves and blushed. "I think he kinda likes me."

Her mother huffed. " *Likes* you? In *this* form? Darling, you know as well as I do that no one can love a changeling, at least while undisguised."

"But he didn't run when he saw me…"

"That doesn't mean he *likes* you. He's a monster himself, so it's no surprise that he had little fear."

"But…he could…"

"Chrysalis!" Arachne exclaimed, stomping her hoof firmly on the floor. "I've seen his heart. It's as empty as a bottomless pit, with no love to give you or anyone else."

"But…" Chrysalis sniffed as tears formed in her eyes. "But…but…"

"Oh, Chrissy," Arachne whispered as she lifted her daughter's chin. "You're too young to comprehend. If you're going to be Queen one day, there is one thing you must remember: love is a weakness."

The princess tilted her head. "But don't we gain power from love?"

"Exactly! It's weakness to whoever feels it, but strength to those who can take advantage of it, like us. But for us to feel love will only lead to our destruction. Take you and this creature, for instance. If this… *liking* you have for him becomes anything more, you would never be able to drain him of his power."

"But you said he doesn't…"

"There are other ways." The queen released her daughter and began pacing the room. "Even if we can't drain his power, we can still use it to our advantage. You said this creature was looking for a home, yes?"

Chrysalis nodded. "He's the last of his kind."

"Yes," Arachne murmured, rubbing her chin. "It just might work…"

"What might work, Mother?"

"You know that new land just over the mountains? That place has a very special kind of magic that I've been dying to get my hooves on, but that same magic protects it!" She chuckled to herself. "Perhaps, if that little creature gets motivated enough…"

Chrysalis bit her lip. "W-what do you mean, Mother?"

Arachne grinned mischievously. "Chrissy, my darling, would you do your mummy a small favor?"

She whispered her plan in her daughter's ear and Chrysalis became sick to her stomach as she listened.

"Mother, I can't…"

"You must," Arachne demanded.

"It'll hurt him…"

"If you're going to be Queen of the Changelings, you must learn not to let your emotions get in your way of power!"

"But…"

"How about I make you a deal? If this plan succeeds, and the new land becomes ours, you can do whatever you like with that creature." She tapped her chin. "Now that I think about it, that would make our takeover all the more official." She nudged the princess toward the door. "Now go, my girl. Make Mummy proud."

Arachne opened the door with her magic. Through it, Discord was juggling broken bottles for a group of worker changelings. Chrysalis glanced at him and then back at her mother. She shrunk under her cold stare. There was no use arguing with her mother. She always got her way, no matter what.

Chrysalis looked back at Discord and gulped. She slowly approached him, her heart growing heavier with every step she took. The draconequus smiled when he saw her.

"Hey, Chrissy!" he exclaimed. "Watch this!"

He tossed all the broken bottles in the air. When they came down, they were oranges. Chrysalis couldn't help but laugh, but then frowned when she remembered her task.

"Um, Discord?" she squeaked.

"Yeah?" Discord said.

The princess looked down at her hooves and rubbed her foreleg awkwardly. "You, um…you see…"

She glanced back at her mother, who was standing in the entrance of the tower, urging her to continue.

"Well," she gulped, looking back at Discord. "You…you can't stay here."

Sadness welled up in the young creature's face. "You…you don't want me here?"

"No, no, I do! But…my mother doesn't."

He hung his head. "Oh. I see."

"I'm really sorry, but…"

"No, it's okay," he sighed, turning to leave. "No one ever wants me around."

"Wait!" she shouted, a little too loudly. "There…there is a place you *can* go."

He looked back at her skeptically. "What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Just over the mountains is a land of ponies. *All* types of ponies: unicorns, earth ponies and pegasi. They all live together in harmony and accept each other's differences. You're…sort of a pony. They might accept you as well."

She choked on her words, knowing that last part wasn't true. The hopeful look on Discord's face made it worse.

"You really think so?"

She winced. "Y-yes."

"What is this land of ponies?"

"They call it," Chrysalis breathed again, "Equestria."

As Mothball and Screwball followed Lieutenant Bombus, they passed by a large room that was sealed off with crystalized mucus. Mothball paused and looked at it closely.

"What's wrong?" Screwball asked.

"That's *my* room," the prince muttered.

"Oh, yeah," Bombus snorted. "The queen did that shortly after you left. She didn't want anyone going in there."

He continued forward, but Mothball was frozen in place. Screwball lightly took his hoof and dragged him along.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"She just…" he stammered. "She just…forgot about me. Cast me aside, pretended like I never existed…just like she did with Bellatrix. Is…is that all I am to her? Something that can be replaced?"

She patted him on the back. "Hey, that's probably not true." She paused. "Okay, maybe it is, but hey. She called you back, didn't she?"

"Only because she didn't have anyone else. You heard her. She thinks Bellatrix would make a better ruler than me. She just brought me back because I was easier to find."

"But isn't that good? I mean if we find Bellatrix, you won't have to be King, and we can be together. That's what you want, right?"

He sighed. "I guess."

Screwball frowned and let her hoof fall. "You guess? What do you mean you *guess* ?"

Mothball opened his mouth as he struggled to find an answer. Fortunately, Lieutenant Bombus came to his rescue.

"Here we are!"

Mothball relayed his surroundings. He was in a lower part of the hive he had never explored before. In front of them was a large, circular doorway that had fragments of crystalized mucus decorating the edge. He figured there must have been a barrier there that had recently been blasted through. Hanging from the doorway was an old black curtain, much like the one that used to conceal Mothball's room. The lieutenant pulled it back to reveal the changeling princess' old chamber.

In the center was a black, queen-sized canopy bed that was covered in dust and cobwebs. On the left was a bookshelf and on the right was a green vanity. The green walls were covered in colorful posters.

"Her majesty ordered that this room remain untouched," Bombus explained. "No one's been in here since the princess left." He smiled brightly. "Well, good luck! I'll be out here if you need anything else!"

"Uh-huh," Screwball muttered. "Well, let's get started."

Mothball nodded dumbly as he followed her into the room.

"Okay," she said, pointing to the side with the vanity. "You take that side and I'll take this side."

He didn't say anything as he complied with her request. He started searching through the vanity while Screwball rummaged through the bookshelf.

She whistled as she read the titles. "Check this out! *The History of Starswirl the Bearded* ? *Hoofdini's Great Escapes* ? *The Magician's Hoofbook* ? This Bellatrix sure was a fan of magic."

Mothball levitated an old green crystal brush out of the drawer. "And she sure liked beautifying herself." He examined the hairs on the brush. "Huh. Her mane was green. Well, that's a surprise."

"Look at these posters here! She sure had a crush on Starswirl the Bearded."

Mothball shrugged. "Mother *did* say she tried to improve her magic in any way possible." He tilted his head when he came upon a pack

of playing cards and a plastic wand. "Real magic or not…"

"I've never heard of this guy," Screwball said as she pointed to a poster of a brown unicorn with blue eyes and a brown beard, wearing a green top hat and cape. "Ozcar the Great? Eh, probably some amateur magician."

Mothball paused as he gazed at all the posters. Screwball noticed and frowned.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Mother never let me decorate *my* room," he mumbled.

"Oh."

She tried to think of something comforting to say.

"Well, uh," she stuttered, "look at it this way. She preserved your room."

"You mean sealed it off," he muttered.

"But she didn't destroy it. I mean she kept this room in decent condition, right?"

He said nothing, so she decided to look under the bed.

"Hey, I found something!"

She used her magic to bring out a gray pony rag doll wearing polka-dotted pants. Mothball scrunched his nose.

"What *is* that?"

"It's a Smarty Pants doll," Screwball declared. "Apple Blossom had one of these when she was little. I guess this belonged to Bellatrix."

Mothball took it in his hooves. He was so confused. Mother had let Bellatrix decorate her room? She had even let her keep a doll?

He sniffed it curiously. "Mother has touched this."

Screwball tilted her head. "How can you even tell? I mean I know you have that super smell and all, but…"

"Every changeling has a distinct scent. We all smell of dried mustard, but with something else thrown in. How else do you think we're able to tell the difference between male and female?"

She shrugged. "Fair enough."

"Anyway, royal changelings are a mix of mustard and plumeria. Mother has that, plus some jasmine to verify that she's female and a hint of sulfur."

"Blech!" Screwball gagged. "Sounds awful."

"You get used to it."

"So what do *I* smell like?"

"Chocolate milk with a hint of cotton candy. Oh, and there's a bit of strawberries in there somewhere."

She blushed. "Oh, you…"

"I think I've got Bellatrix's scent on here too," he said, inhaling the doll again. "But it's very faint. It hasn't been used in so long, and Mother's scent is masking it."

"Why not try this brush here?" Screwball said, summoning the crystal brush covered in green hair.

Mothball took the brush and let his nostrils draw in the scent. "Mustard." He sniffed again. "Plumeria." And again. "Jasmine." He inhaled deeper. "Burnt toast?"

"She sounds fun," Screwball joked.

"But it's like Mother said, even if I have her scent, it would take forever to find her. Do you know any magic that could help us?"

She shrugged. "I could try and summon her, but I've never met this girl, so that would make it harder. I could teleport us to her, but I

don't know where she is. Even chaos magic has its limits."

Suddenly, a light bulb appeared over her head. "I've got it! Auntie Twilight once showed me a spell that can find some pony using something that belonged to that pony."

"Can you cast it?" Mothball asked.

She sighed. "Unfortunately, finding spells aren't my forte. But if we bring that brush to Auntie Twilight, maybe she can help us!" Her smile disappeared. "Uh oh."

"What?"

Screwball glanced at her hoof and summoned a watch. "Holy Frijoles! It's almost nine a.m.! We gotta get back to the castle!"

"Now? Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "Think about it. The two of us are engaged and neither of us are in our beds. What's Dad gonna think?"

Mothball tapped his chin. "I have three guesses."

"And they are…?"

"One: that we eloped. Two: that we went off someplace to…you know. Three: that I led you into the deepest part of the forest, sucked you dry, flew off into the night and left you for dead."

"You know my dad so well. Now grab that brush and let's go before he notices we're gone."

Mothball nodded and levitated the brush. Screwball raised an eyebrow as he set the Smarty Pants doll on his back.

"What are you doing?"

"Uh…" he stammered. "You know, uh…in case the brush isn't enough."

Screwball shook her head with a smile. "Sure, whatever you say."

She placed her hoof on Mothball's shoulder and teleported them to her room back at the Castle of Chaos.

"You think he noticed we were gone?" the changeling asked.

They heard a cough and turned to see Discord sitting on the bed, his arms crossed and his eyes glaring fiercely at them.

"He noticed," he growled.

Heh, heh, heh. Okay, fine, so a bit of Mother Gothel from *Tangled* was incorporated into Queen Arachne (meaning "spider," thought it was appropriate). And yes, I believe you know what "Ozcar the Great" is a reference of.

Tension

I did warn you I wasn't sure how fast I was going to update things.

Screwball and Mothball sat quietly on the couch and watched Discord pace back and forth, ranting as he had been doing for the past hour. Fluttershy sat in an armchair with Zany in her lap, waiting for her husband to cool down.

"COMPLETELY IRRESPONSIBLE! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW WORRIED I WAS?!"

"As you've said a hundred times now," Screwball muttered.

"DIDN'T EVEN LEAVE A NOTE, OR CALL ON THE MAGIC MIRROR, OR EVEN INVENT THE TELEPHONE! YOU KIDS HAVE PULLED CRAZY STUNTS BEFORE, BUT THIS…THIS IS…"

Fluttershy gasped and covered Zany's ears. After a full three minutes, she put down her hooves and whispered to her son.

"Go play upstairs."

"Aw!" Zany pouted. "But it's fun watching Daddy be cranky!"

She gave him the Stare and the young colt floated up and disappeared through the ceiling.

As Discord continued his rant, Screwball was getting bored and Mothball was getting hungry. She summoned a chocolate shake for him and a comic book for herself.

"I TRUST YOU WITH MY DAUGHTER, I LET YOU PROPOSE TO HER, AND THEN YOU GO BEHIND MY BACK AND…" Discord trailed off when he noticed the two were otherwise occupied. "ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?!"

"Mmm-hmm," they nodded nonchalantly.

He slapped himself in the forehead. "Do you know what I thought when I saw both your beds empty?!"

"That we eloped?" Screwball grumbled.

"That we ran off to do something naughty?" Mothball muttered.

"That Mothball dragged me into the forest and left me for dead?"

Discord opened his mouth, annoyed and speechless. He growled as he clenched his fists together.

"Alright, smarties!" he grunted. "Where *were* you then?!"

Screwball looked up from her comic. "Are you quite done?"

"NO! I AM VERY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU BOTH! AND YOU ARE BOTH GROUNDED FOR FIVE CENTURIES!" He paused. " *Now* I'm done."

She glanced back at her comic as she replied, "We went to the changeling hive."

"You WHAT?!" both Fluttershy and Discord exclaimed.

"What in Equestria were you doing *there* ?!" Fluttershy demanded.

The engaged couple remained silent as Mothball sipped his shake and Screwball turned the pages of her book.

"WELL?!" Discord bellowed.

"We'll tell you everything if you'll just calm down and stop shouting," Screwball said firmly.

"CALM DOWN?! HOW CAN I BE CALM WHEN YOU TWO…?!"

"Discord," Fluttershy said gently, placing a hoof on his back. "Deep breaths."

Discord quickly inhaled and exhaled.

"Now count," she commanded softly.

"One, two, three, four, five, six…"

It took him until two hundred and thirty-seven, but Discord managed to calm down. Mothball and Screwball put their distractions away and looked at each other worriedly as they silently decided who should speak. Mothball hung his head and Screwball nodded in understanding.

"Well," she said, looking up at her parents, "you see, these changeling guards tried to kidnap Mothball last night because Chrysalis is dying and they need a ruler, but Mothball doesn't wanna be King so now we gotta find the other heir who Chrysalis apparently had before Mothball so that she can rule the changelings and we only have a few days until Chrysalis dies, can we have some breakfast now?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Discord said, putting up his paw and claw. "One more time, please, and a little slower, if you don't mind."

"Mother is dying," Mothball muttered solemnly.

"Oh dear," Fluttershy whispered.

Discord looked as if an anvil had just landed on his foot. "C-Chrissy? D-dying? But…that can't be! She's only a thousand and seventy-two! Or was it seventy-four?"

Fluttershy fluttered down to Mothball's side and put her hoof around him. "You okay?"

He sighed and looked away from her.

"Apparently it happens to all royal changelings," Screwball explained. "Some inherited disease, I guess." She paused and looked at Mothball. "Hey, should I be worried?"

"We've got at least a thousand years," he said. "Can we not worry about the distant future right now and focus on the present?"

"Right. Anyway, Chrysalis apparently had a daughter before

Mothball named Princess Bellatrix whom she apparently banished a long time ago, so now we gotta go out and find her."

Discord slowly sat himself in the armchair. "She's dying?"

Fluttershy flew to her husband's side and stroked the back of his long neck. "I know it's a shock, honey. I mean Chrysalis has never been the nicest pony, but she's still your oldest…"

"Hey, wait a minute!" the draconequus shouted, standing up and looking down at Screwball. "Did you say there was a lost changeling princess you had to find?"

"Yeah," Screwball replied.

"And where exactly is this princess?"

She shrugged. "Heck if we know."

Her father folded his arms. "So what you're saying is that the two of you are about to go on a wild goose chase, going who knows where, going up against who knows what, for who knows how long?"

She looked up at the ceiling and then nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much it."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT! IF YOU THINK I'M GOING TO LET YOU GO OUT ON YOUR OWN WHERE YOU CAN GET MUGGED OR ABDUCTED OR MANGLED BY SOME MYTHICAL BEAST…"

"Here he goes again," Screwball muttered, rolling her eyes and picking up her comic book.

"WELL, LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING, MISSY! YOU AND YOUR CHANGELING FIANCÉ ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE WITHOUT AN ESCORT! AND I…"

A knock on the door interrupted him.

"I'll get it!" Fluttershy squeaked, anxious to break the tension.

She opened the door and was met with Princess Twilight Sparkle

and her little daughter, Twinkle.

"Twilight!" Fluttershy piped, smiling awkwardly. "What are you doing here?"

"It's Saturday, remember?" Twilight said, scrunching her nose in confusion. "Ten o'clock?"

The pegasus looked down at Twinkle and gasped. "The playdate! I completely forgot!"

The princess leaned past Fluttershy and saw Discord glaring crossly at Screwball and Mothball.

"Is this a bad time?"

"Oh, no!" Fluttershy insisted. "Come in!" She called upstairs. "Zany! Your friend Twinkle's here!"

"Mom, *why* ?!" Twinkle whined. "Zany's annoying! He bugs me!"

"Now, now, sweetie," Fluttershy said, kneeling down to her. "Zany adores you!"

"He turned my books into paper bats!"

"Uh…that was just a way to show his affection!"

"Don't you worry about it," Twilight said, summoning a comb to straighten out her daughter's short mane. "You just be nice to Zany and he'll be nice to you."

"Humph!" the three-year-old grunted. "He's a big meanie and always is!"

"'Always *will be* ,' honey."

"See? You think so too!"

"Hiya, Twinkle Toes!"

Twinkle screeched as she looked up and found Zany balancing on her horn with his front left hoof.

"How…wha…?" she stammered.

"Prince of Chaos, baby!" he cackled.

He yelped in pain as sparks emitted from Twinkle's horn and burned his hoof. He sucked on it while the young alicorn smiled in triumph.

"Gotcha!"

Zany took his hoof out of his mouth and smiled. "Oh, but I got *you* . Or rather…your wings."

Twinkle gasped as he held up two small purple wings. She glanced at her back to confirm that they were no longer there. She glared up at Zany.

"Gimme back my wings!"

"You want 'em?" Zany taunted. "Come get 'em!"

He stuck them in his mouth like a dog with a newspaper and chuckled as he floated off.

"Zany!" Twinkle shouted, racing after him. "Come back here!"

Discord blinked as he watched her chase Zany around the room.

"Remind me again why we keep meshing these two together?" he whispered to Fluttershy. "They obviously hate each other."

"'Hate' is a strong word, honey," Fluttershy replied with a small smile. "If they spend more time together, they'll learn to get along."

"OW!" Zany screamed as a blast from Twinkle's horn singed his rear.

As his mouth opened, Twinkle's wings fell out and she caught them in her hooves.

"Ha!" she exclaimed with a smug grin. "I win!"

"Sure," Zany said nonchalantly. "You got your wings. Too bad about your tail though."

"What are you…?"

She gasped when she glanced back and realized her tail was gone. Zany smirked as he held it up triumphantly.

"Point for the Prince of Chaos!" he laughed as he flew upstairs.

"Zany, give that back!"

She started to chase him and then stopped and looked at the wings in her hooves. She tried to stick them onto her back.

"Ugh, how do you put these things back on?!" she whined.

"Hey, Twinkle Toes!" Zany called. "You too chicken to chase me?"

Twinkle narrowed her eyes. "Do *not* call me Twinkle Toes! I don't *have* toes!"

She dropped her wings and pursued the chaotic foal upstairs. Every pony flinched as they heard a blast and a yelp.

"MOM!" Zany's voice yelled. "TWINKLE TOES SET MY HAIR ON FIRE!"

Discord rolled his eyes at Fluttershy. "Oh, yeah. They're *so* in love!"

She blushed in embarrassment. "I'll just, uh…go sort that out."

She picked up Twinkle's disembodied wings and flew upstairs.

"ZANY!" her voice boomed. "PUT DOWN THAT ANVIL! TWINKLE! STOP SHOOTING LASER BEAMS AT ZANY!"

Discord and Twilight looked at each other and held up their hands and hooves.

" *I* didn't teach him/her that!" they said at the same time.

"Well," Screwball coughed as she stood up. "It's actually a good thing you're here, Aunt Twilight. We need your help finding a lost princess so Mothball doesn't have to become King of the Changelings."

Twilight blinked. "Wait, what?"

The chaotic mare sighed. "I'm going to have to explain the whole story over again, aren't I?"

After Screwball had briefed Twilight on the situation, the alicorn nodded in interest.

"Wow," she marveled. "I always wondered how changeling culture worked in terms of reproduction."

Fluttershy, who had returned from upstairs after breaking up the foal fight, turned to her friend with wide eyes.

"Really?" she asked, cringing.

The princess blushed. "I mean the whole thing with the queen and all."

"So now we have to find Princess Bellatrix before Chrysalis croaks," Screwball continued. "She apparently has to give some 'royal blessing' or it won't be official or whatever."

"One thing I don't get," Twilight said, turning to Mothball. "Why don't you want to be King? I mean with you ruling the changelings, you might keep them under control and find a way for them to feed on enough love to survive without hurting any pony."

"It, uh…" Mothball gulped, glancing at his fiancée. "It wouldn't work out for me and Screwy."

"Why not?" Fluttershy asked, tilting her head. "King of the Changelings or not, can't you still be together?"

The changeling turned to Screwball, who gave him a pleading look.

"I can't marry a pony and be King," he said bluntly.

Screwball sighed in relief. Neither of them wanted Discord to know of the option of turning Screwball into a changeling.

"But maybe this princess could be a better queen than Chrysalis," Fluttershy suggested.

"She *did* leave the hive for some reason," Screwball pointed out.

"I'm sure she's lovely."

"I suppose," Twilight said, rubbing her chin. "And finding the lost princess could get the changelings on our side and we can work out a treaty of some sort."

"So you'll help us?" Screwball pleaded.

The alicorn nodded. "Of course, I will. But…why do you need *my* help?"

"You can use that location spell you showed me." She took out the crystal brush. "See? We even brought something of hers!"

"I suppose I could." Twilight scrutinized the younger mare. "Haven't you been practicing the spells I taught you?"

"Um…" Screwball stammered, her cheeks turning red. "Look, can you do the location spell or not?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Give me the brush."

Screwball held it out as the princess lifted it with her magic and set it on the coffee table. She stared intently at the brush for a few seconds. Then she closed her eyes as her horn glowed. A beam shot from her horn to the brush, engulfing it in bright magenta.

When the light diminished, Twilight opened her eyes. The brush was still glowing, but the magic had turned green. Then it slowly rose from the table and started spinning in place.

"It's searching for her," the alicorn explained.

The brush came to a sudden stop as it pointed in one direction. Twilight smiled in triumph.

"It has her trail."

"So now what?" Mothball inquired.

"Now we have to follow it."

"Okay!" Screwball chimed, hopping off the couch. "Let's go!"

"Hold on!" Discord exclaimed, standing up. "What makes you think you're going? The two of you are grounded, remember?"

His daughter scowled. "Dad, this is important!"

Twilight shrugged. "Finding a lost changeling princess *is* a pretty big deal."

"But no pony says *you* have to go!" Discord argued. "I mean Twilight here has the spell. She can find her on her own!"

The alicorn shook her head. "Even if I do find her, she won't trust me. After all, I have a bad reputation among changelings, not to mention I'm a princess to an enemy kingdom. It's best that Mothball comes along so I don't alarm her."

"But Screwy doesn't have to go!"

Screwball put her hoof defiantly around Mothball. "I go where *he* goes!"

"WHAT?!"

"Honey," Fluttershy said softly, touching his shoulder. "Screwball's old enough to make her own decisions. You know she'll be alright. She has your magic, after all." She turned to Screwball. "But you should wait a while before you leave. You two didn't get any sleep last night and haven't had breakfast."

Twilight nodded. "Your mother's right. We should prepare ourselves before heading out. Who knows where this brush will take us? I suggest we leave later this afternoon, so you two have time to rest and eat. I'll go get supplies from the library…"

"Uh, Aunt Twilight?" Screwball said, summoning a large brown backpack.

"Right. But I'll still have to send a message to Flash that I'll be gone for a while. He's in the Crystal Empire on business." She gasped. "Oh gosh! He won't be back for two days! Fluttershy, do you think you can take care of Twinkle until then?"

"But of course," Fluttershy smiled.

Every pony jumped as the castle suddenly shook.

"AN EARTHQUAKE?!" Zany's voice shouted from upstairs. "IS THAT THE BEST YOU GOT, TWINKLE TOES?! HOW ABOUT A VOLCANIC ERUPTION?!"

"He's not serious, is he?" Twilight questioned.

"I'll look into it," Discord volunteered.

He disappeared and returned a few seconds later, wearing a smile of satisfaction.

"I put them in a time-out. That should keep them quiet for a few minutes."

Twilight looked at him nervously. "Uh…what exactly do you mean by a 'time-out?'"

Fluttershy threw her hoof around the alicorn and forced a smile. "Don't worry! She's in good hooves here!"

"Then it's settled!" Discord declared. "We leave this afternoon!"

Screwball bit her lip. "We?"

"I'm coming with you, of course! You didn't think I was going to let you go on this quest without supervision, did you?"

"Um, Aunt Twilight…"

"Besides, it never hurts to have another chaotic claw onboard, right?"

"Um, Dad?" Screwball said, laughing nervously as she pushed the

draconequus towards her room. "Can we talk?"

" *Talk* ?" Discord repeated. "I know that word! It's never anything good!"

She slammed the door behind them and turned to her father sincerely.

"Look, Dad," she sighed. "I… How do I say this?" She took a deep breath. "You can't come with us."

Discord was taken aback. "What? Why?"

"Well…" She bit her lip. "See…you…

His arms drooped to his sides. "You…don't want me around?"

"No, no! It's just that…when you and Mothball are together, things can get…pretty ugly and…"

"Oh, *I* see!" He glared at her as he folded his arms. "It's *him* , isn't it?!"

"Dad, please…"

"Now that you have your big, strong, changeling fiancé, you don't need your old dad protecting you anymore! Is that right?!"

"Dad, stop! This is something I have to do on my own!"

"No, it's fine! I can tell when I'm not needed! After all, I spent the first thousand years of my life not being needed! I just didn't think my own daughter…"

"Dad, I didn't mean it like that! Why you always gotta freak out about everything?!"

"You know what? Forget it! You wanna go on this quest so bad? Then go! Don't let *me* slow you down!"

He flashed out of the room before Screwball could say anything further. She pressed her back against the door and slowly slid to the

floor, groaning in frustration. She hated getting into fights with her dad, because he hardly ever let her get a word in. When he did, he wouldn't listen and take everything the wrong way.

But she really didn't want him to come. Not only would he spend the entire journey lecturing her and Mothball on how unmarried couples shouldn't hold hooves, but this was something she wanted to do alone, without his help. This problem involved her and Mothball, and only they should be working to fix it. They needed Twilight for the location spell, but her dad would just get in the way.

Still, she wished she hadn't yelled at him like that.

Things are going to be a little slow, just so you know.

The Search

Sorry for the long wait. I wanted to get my "Nutcracker" story done. I thought I'd be finished with that before the holiday season was up. Oh well. Better late than never.

A few hours later, Fluttershy, Zany and Twinkle were standing at the castle entrance to see Screwball, Twilight and Mothball off.

"You sure you don't want me and the girls to come along?" Fluttershy asked her friend. "It'll be like old times."

"I appreciate the offer," Twilight said with a smile, "but it'll be enough of a shock for Bellatrix to see a princess of Equestria, but all the bearers of the Elements of Harmony? She'll think we mean her harm and run before we get the chance to talk to her. Besides, a lot's changed over the decades. We all have families and responsibilities now. Which reminds me…"

She knelt down to her daughter. "You be good now, sweetie. Okay?"

Twinkle folded her hooves and glanced sideways at Zany. "I will if *he* will."

"I'll only be gone for a few days. As soon as we find the princess and bring her back to her hive, I'll be right home. If you get lonely, you can always call me on the magic mirror."

"Oh, Screwball!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "Do you have the…?"

Screwball smiled as she flashed a mirror into her hoof. "Roger!"

Her mother kissed her on the forehead. "You sure you're ready for something like this?"

"Get real, Mom. Mothy and I defeated a whole changeling army. How bad could finding one changeling princess be?"

"Now, if you run into any carnivorous creatures along the way…"

"Relax, Mom! I'll do what you taught me."

Fluttershy grinned and gave her daughter a hug. Then she did the same to Mothball.

"Take care," she whispered.

"I will, Mom," he replied.

Screwball looked through the doorway and saw Discord moping on the couch, his back turned to her.

"Dad?" she called softly.

He gave no response. Fluttershy looked back at him and sighed.

"He's just concerned for you, you know?" she told her daughter.

"I know," Screwball said with a sigh. "I just wish I hadn't yelled at him. Can you tell him I'm sorry and that…I love him?"

Fluttershy nodded and kissed her daughter one last time.

"Good luck, sweetie."

She and the foals waved as the traveling party took to the skies. Twilight withdrew the glowing brush from her saddlebag and waited for it to point the way.

When they were out of sight, Twinkle yelped and spun around.

"Who pinched me?!"

Zany let out a snicker, which made the young alicorn fume in fury.

"Why, you…"

She lashed out her hooves at him, which forced Fluttershy to step between them.

"Alright, kids," she commanded softly. "Why don't you go play in the

ball pit? If I hear any fighting or dangerous use of magic, I will not hesitate to have Discord send you back to your bubbles!"

The foals shrieked and zoomed upstairs. Fluttershy then looked sympathetically at her husband, flew over to him and sat down.

"Screwy's sorry, you know," she said gently. "And she loves…"

"I heard," Discord mumbled, turning to face her. "How come *you're* not worried? Usually, when something like this happens, you're fussing over every pony."

"I'm *very* worried, honey, but *one* of us has to keep a level head here. Besides, Screwy's a grown girl. Not to mention she has *your* power. She's perfectly capable of handling herself."

He huffed. "That's not the point. She prefers that walking ball of Swiss cheese over me!"

"Sweetie, you know that's not true."

"I'm sorry. It's just that…my little Screwy's growing up and…"

Fluttershy laid a hoof on his shoulder. "I know. Lots of changes are happening and you're not ready to let her go yet. Discord, just because Screwy's growing up and starting a life of her own doesn't mean you'll stop being her father."

He sighed and said nothing. Fluttershy lowered her hoof as a new thought came to her.

"How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Cross," Discord growled. "I thought that was already established."

"No. I meant about…Chrysalis."

He paused. "What about her?"

"Well…despite everything…you seemed quite shocked when you heard she was dying. You said she used to be your friend…"

"Fluttershy, I know it is in your nature to sympathize with all living creatures, but this psychopath tried to kill you! And succeeded, for that matter!"

"But I'm alive now, aren't I?"

"That's not the point! Since the beginning, she's stopped at nothing to destroy my happiness! Why, she's the very reason I came to Equestria and went mad and was turned to stone and…"

"And met me."

"Ye…"

He stopped and looked at her as realization came to him. Fluttershy smiled assuredly.

"If you want, you can go see her."

"But…" he started to say.

"It's okay. I won't mind."

"But…we hate each other!"

"Then now's as good a time as ever for you to tie up any loose ends that remain between you two."

He stared into his wife's eyes for a long time and then sighed. "As always, you're right."

When Discord flashed into Chrysalis' bedroom, the changelings guarding her bared their teeth. General Mantis stood protectively in front of his queen.

"What are *you* doing here, chaotic scum?!"

The draconequus folded his arms. "I request an audience with Queen Insectra Arachne Chrysalis Changeling III."

"You're not welcome here, you cur! If you don't make yourself scarce

by the time I count to five, we'll have no choice but to…"

"It's alright, General," Chrysalis commanded hoarsely. "Let him approach."

"But your majesty, what if he…?"

"I'm already on my deathbed. What more can he do to me?"

"But…"

"Leave us!"

The changelings hesitated, but obeyed their queen's command. They shot deadly glares at the draconequus before departing out the door. The general did not leave his spot.

"That includes you, Mantis," Chrysalis heaved.

"But my queen…"

"Go! I'll be fine."

Mantis opened his mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by his queen's warning glance. He hung his head in defeat and followed the others out. When the door was shut, Discord and Chrysalis were left alone for the first time in over a millennium.

"So," she said, smirking slightly. "Have you come to gloat? Perhaps put me out of my misery?"

"Actually," he replied slowly, "I've come to…well, talk."

She snorted. "Talk, eh? Well, I must say it's been a while since *that's* happened. You remember the last time we just 'talked?' On that cliff…the two of us…so young…"

Discord turned his back. "Those days have long since passed."

"But you haven't forgotten them, have you? *I* certainly haven't."

"The past is the past, Chrysalis. I actually came to…make amends."

"Really?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "Well, I must say. It took you long enough. Why the sudden change of heart?"

He faced her again. "Luckily for you, my wife has a very forgiving soul. You remember her, don't you? The one you nearly murdered?!"

"Did I? Well, well, well. You sure know how to pick 'em, Dissy dear. You mean to say this pony is naïve enough to forgive me for trying to destroy her?"

Discord pounded his fists on the bed. "If you insult my wife again, I *will* make your death come sooner!"

"If you really are here to make amends, you're not doing a very good job of it."

He took a deep breath and retracted his paw and claw. "Right. Well, for starters…I can cure you."

She huffed. "Yeah, right. Even if you could, why would you do that for me?"

"You're the most messed up mare I've ever met, but you're still the mother of the boy my daughter's going to marry."

Chrysalis rolled her eyes. "Go on. Just try your chaos magic on me."

Discord snapped his fingers and waited. But Chrysalis didn't look any better. He snapped again and still nothing happened. She shook her head with a sigh.

"It's no use, old friend. I'm magically terminal. No spell in the world can cure me. Don't even bother trying. My time has come. I'm dried up. Gone. So if you have nothing else to say, leave."

Discord stared at her for a moment and then turned his back again. He raised his claw to teleport himself away.

"Dissy?" Chrysalis called weakly. "I just want you to know…I didn't want to send you away. It was my mother's idea."

He lowered his claw and sighed. "That's alright. You know? In a strange, twisted way, I should thank you."

She raised an eyebrow again. "Really?"

He turned his head. "Had it not been for you, I would've never met Fluttershy and found my happiness. Also, by having Mothball, you provided my daughter with happiness too."

Chrysalis groaned. "In that case, my plans to destroy you clearly backfired."

They couldn't help but chuckle a bit. Then Chrysalis looked up at him with sad eyes.

"Do you suppose, if things had been different…you and I could've…?"

Discord thought about it for a moment and then shook his head. "No. I wasn't in a place to love anybody. But maybe…if we had tried hard enough…we could've been friends."

She sighed. "Even then, that wouldn't have been enough."

He shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"Oh well," she heaved as she closed her eyes. "Guess some things were never meant to be."

Discord watched as she fell asleep and thought about the young princess he had met long ago. He hadn't forgotten that night on the cliff. He was still thinking about it when he teleported home.

"Go on, Chrissy," Queen Arachne said as she stretched on her throne. "Show Mummy what you've learned."

Princess Chrysalis closed her eyes and concentrated on the most complicated creature she could think of. Soon enough, green flames engulfed her as she began to change form. Her hooves became paws, her fangs grew a foot long, her head enlarged into that of a

tiger. Arachne's eyes widened as a head grew from her daughter's tail and another seemed to be developing on her shoulder. When the flames diminished, a tiger-goat-snake chimera stood in Chrysalis' place.

"Impressive," Arachne said with a smirk. "You've certainly been practicing."

Chrysalis breathed as she returned to her young adult self. "I learned from the best."

"Oh, yes," her mother said as she walked towards her. "You are ready, my dear."

"Ready for the throne?"

"That too. You see, I have a special mission for you."

"What is it, Mother?"

"My scouts tell me that the young princesses of Equestria have befriended a young monster with powers beyond anything they have ever seen."

Chrysalis stiffened and whispered, "Discord?"

"Yes," Arachne growled. "It would appear our little pawn is getting the royal treatment from those ponies. If they don't start hating him soon, he'll never be motivated to take Equestria for us! So, my dear, I want you to go see this Discord and find his weak points. Surely there's something we can use against him."

"M-me?" the princess stammered. "You want *me* to see him?"

"Oh, I know how you've been pining for that creature. I've seen you sneaking out trying to catch a glimpse of him. Well, my dear, if all goes as planned, you can have him. After all, with his unique power, you can create the most powerful changeling race in history!"

Chrysalis was excited, not about the power, but the idea of getting the creature she had been dreaming of for the last decade. After going over things with her mother, she buzzed out of the hive.

On the borders of Equestria, she found him sitting on a cliff. In the town below, a parade was in progress, and he was making fireworks appear in the sky with a wave of his paw.

The changeling's heart beat wildly as her eyes beheld him. He was taller, at least a foot more than her. His neck was now as long as a giraffe's and his body as skinny as a snake's. The white hair on his head was thinning out and a deer antler and goat horn had sprouted. When his head turned, she could examine his profile. His face was longer and thinner, and a small white goatee had grown on his chin.

She had thought him cute before, but now he was as handsome as ever.

Then she ducked behind a tree, contemplating how she was going to approach him. She licked her hoof and used it to straighten out her mane and then dusted the grime off her body. Then she decided to have some fun with him and took the form of a manticore.

She jumped out of her hiding place and roared. Discord spun around in surprise, but narrowed his eyes and snapped his fingers. Chrysalis shrieked as she was turned upside-down.

"No, wait!" she said, changing back to herself. "It's me!"

Discord squinted and gasped. "Chrissy?"

The princess yelped as she was dropped to the ground. The draconequus approached her in amazement.

"Is it really you?"

Chrysalis looked up at him and smiled. "We should stop meeting like this."

He laughed as he helped her up. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," she said, nervously rubbing her foreleg. "I…I missed you."

He blinked. " *You* missed *me* ?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. I…I would've come sooner, but…Mother…"

"Aw, it's okay. I get it."

"So how are things? I hear you're doing quite well here in Equestria."

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it! Come, look!"

She blushed as he grabbed her hoof and led her to the cliff's edge. He snapped his fingers and made more fireworks appear.

"You see?" he said, pointing to the sky and then the parade below. "The princesses are letting me help out with festivals and natural disasters and stuff. I can use my magic and no pony's criticizing me for it! The fireworks are my favorite thing to do!"

"They're beautiful," Chrysalis said.

"Oh, just sit back. You ain't seen nothing yet!"

He sat them both down and waved his glowing paw. Chrysalis gasped as one firework took the form of a dragon that began flapping through the sky. It then breathed fire, causing several "Oohs!" to erupt from below.

As the show went on, Chrysalis turned to Discord. His smiling face was glowing with the flashing colors he was creating in the sky. In a moment of boldness, she closed her eyes and slowly leaned her head onto his shoulder. Discord looked down at her in confusion.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing!" she said, quickly sitting back up.

They glanced away awkwardly.

"So, um," Chrysalis stammered. "If you play such a big role in this parade, why are you up here and not down there with the ponies?"

Discord sighed sadly. "Unfortunately…not every pony is used to the way I look. The princesses are okay with me, but…"

She looked at him sympathetically and touched his paw. He glanced down at her hoof as if the action were alien.

"But you at least have some friends, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, smiling slightly. "Celestia's especially great."

She blinked. "Celestia?"

"The oldest princess. She's actually the one who found me. See, I've been living in a cave for the last decade and she saw me practicing my magic. She suggested I use my talents for good and offered me a home at the castle. I don't think I've ever met a nicer pony!"

Chrysalis felt a twinge of uneasiness in her stomach. "So you would say this Celestia is a good…friend?"

"I think so. Well, she says she is."

She gulped. "Is she…pretty?"

He tapped his chin in thought. "Well, by pony standards, I think so. Oh, you should see her hair! It's the neatest shade of pink and it's flowing! No, really! It actually defies gravity! So chaotic!"

Chrysalis took a strand of her flat, greasy cobweb hair in her hoof and scowled. Then she turned to Discord and cast the spell to make her see his loved ones. Her face grew hot when a white alicorn with flowing pink hair came up. It wasn't quite love, but the affection he held for Celestia was greater than what he felt for her!

A new feeling started welling up within her, one she had never experienced before. Her blood was boiling, her face was flushing, her head was pounding. She had the urge to zap that alicorn into dust.

She felt jealousy. Pure, burning jealousy.

"So how have you been?" Discord asked.

"Fine," Chrysalis said through her teeth. "So…do you think anything…serious might come with this Celestia?"

He tilted his head in thought. "I don't know. You think I'd have a chance?"

She was heaving so hard, steam blew out of her nostrils.

"You alright?" Discord questioned.

"Fine!" she snapped. "Just *fine* !"

He shrugged and turned back to the parade. She followed his gaze and smirked as an idea occurred to her.

"You know, you don't have to do *everything* the princesses tell you."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well…it doesn't seem fair that you should only use magic at their request. You should be allowed to do what you want. You know. Have a little fun."

He twiddled his fingers. "Well…"

"Oh, I don't mean do something destructive. I'm just saying you could…spice things up a bit. That parade is rather boring, don't you think?"

He gazed down at the procession. "Well…those floats aren't nearly as colorful…"

"I know. Ugh! That awful shade of brown on that one! Wouldn't it look better if it were…pink?"

"Hmm," Discord said, rubbing his chin with a smile. "You know? It probably would."

He snapped his fingers and one of the floats turned pink. They could hear a few gasps from the crowd.

"How about confetti?" Chrysalis suggested. "Don't all parades have confetti?"

"I haven't been to many," Discord declared. "Do they?"

"They *should* ."

He snapped his fingers and confetti began falling from the sky. The ponies shrieked and murmured in confusion.

"Great!" Chrysalis applauded. "But you know what would make this *really* phenomenal? You remember that chocolate rain you showed me? I'm sure the ponies would *love* to see chocolate milk fall from the sky!"

"Hey, you're right!"

He snapped his fingers again and pink clouds appeared over the town. The ponies screamed as brown rain started pouring on them. Discord and Chrysalis laughed hysterically.

"Oh, this is so much fun!" Discord wailed. "Why didn't I think of this sooner?!"

Chrysalis smiled. "You just needed the right…inspiration."

"Oh, Celestia and Luna will love this!"

The princess frowned and then scowled. Then she let out a grunt as she got up and fled.

"Hey, where you going?" Discord called. "The fun's just beginning! Chrissy?"

She ignored his shouts and kept flying until she reached the hive. When she burst into the throne room, she was in tears. Queen Arachne's eyes widened at the sight.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Mother!" Chrysalis wailed, throwing her hooves around the queen. "I…I feel awful!"

"Shhh, shhh," her mother whispered, stroking her back. "Tell me what happened."

"He…he wouldn't stop talking about that…that Celestia! He…he said

her hair was prettier than mine and…he loves her more than me!"

"Oh, Chrissy. I warned you about this. You must never let your emotions rule you. But fear not, sweetheart. Once Equestria is ours and the princesses are disposed of, he can be yours."

"I…I feel so…angry! Like…like I want…I want…"

"What, my dear?"

Chrysalis narrowed her eyes and pulled away from her mother.

"I want to make him *suffer* !" she said through her teeth.

Arachne smiled. "That's my girl."

Screwball, Mothball and Twilight had been following the hairbrush for two hours. They flew above the trees in order to shorten the journey as well as avoid danger below. Screwball had suggested teleporting ahead a little, but Twilight argued that if they teleported too far ahead, they'd have to fly around until they found the trail again. So while Twilight led the group, paying close attention to the brush, the engaged couple came up with ways to pass the time.

"Is it bigger than a breadbox?" Screwball asked.

Mothball raised an eyebrow. "A regular-sized one or the one in our kitchen?"

"The one in our kitchen."

"Then yes."

"Is it a whale?"

"Yes."

"Woo hoo! That's fifty-seven to fifty-five! I win!"

The changeling groaned. "Can we play something else?"

"Wait!" Twilight said, suddenly coming to a stop.

"What?" Screwball asked.

"Something's wrong."

In front of them, the hairbrush was twisting and turning, pointing in one direction and then another.

"Strange," Twilight uttered. "The brush can't seem to decide whether we should go south or southwest."

"Why's it doing that?" Mothball inquired.

"I don't know. Maybe I did the spell wrong or…"

Then the brush stopped and moved in its chosen direction.

"I guess it's southwest then," Screwball said as she followed it.

"It's still strange," Twilight muttered. "I wonder what made it do that."

Eventually, they stopped their pondering and continued on their journey. Mothball glanced at his fiancée and decided to say something that had been on his mind all day.

"Uh, Screwy?" he said.

"Yeah?" she replied with a smile.

"Suppose…Bellatrix doesn't want to be Queen. What do we do then?"

Screwball rolled her eyes. "We *force* her, of course!"

"But what if…?"

"We're here!" Twilight announced.

The group looked out in the far distance and saw a small town in the middle of the desert.

"Where are we?" Mothball asked.

"Looks like Canter Creek. According to this brush, Bellatrix is somewhere in that town."

"Yee-haw!" Screwball exclaimed, making a cowboy hat appear on her head. "I always wanted to visit the Old West!"

As they descended to the ground, Mothball took the form of a green pegasus with blue hair so as not to alarm the locals. Screwball gazed in wonder at the old-fashioned desert town.

"This place is amazing!"

"Ah, yes," Twilight said with a sigh. "Good old Canter Creek. You know the girls and I once defeated a gang of cattle rustlers here?"

"Ooh, I love that story!" Screwball squeaked, clapping her hooves together. "I especially love the part where Mom distracts the bad guys with her atomic cuteness!"

"There don't seem to be a lot of ponies here," Mothball observed. "Why would Bellatrix hang out here? Usually a changeling would settle somewhere with lots of potential victims."

"I don't know," Twilight said, not taking her eyes off the brush, "but keep your nose out for her."

He sniffed the air and gagged. "This town smells like chili peppers!"

"Oh yeah, I forgot!" Screwball exclaimed. "Canter Creek grows the best chili peppers in Equestria! Auntie Twilight, we should remember to get some!"

"First we find the princess," the alicorn said. "Then maybe we'll do some shopping."

Mothball yelped as some pony bumped into him.

"Oh, excuse me, mister!" a filly's voice said.

"No problem," he said as a flash of blue went by.

Then he paused as he caught a whiff of something strange. It smelt

of dried mustard, plumeria and jasmine, but it wasn't Bellatrix. There was something else about the smell that peaked his curiosity. He turned to locate the source of the scent.

"Hey, look!" Screwball shouted. "The brush is leading us to that caravan over there!"

Mothball forgot the odd smell and turned to where Screwball was pointing. A small crowd of ponies was gathered around a wooden wagon painted dark blue. It opened up into a stage with a red curtain.

"You suppose Bellatrix's somewhere in the audience?" Screwball asked.

"We'll have to see," Twilight said, following the brush into the crowd.

Ponies grunted and gasped as she pushed through, though smiled brightly when they saw the princess. Some of them whispered praises to her, but she ignored them. As the young couple followed her, Mothball sniffed the air again.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "I think I've got her scent!"

"So she *is* here?" Screwball asked.

"Yeah," he sniffed. "And the brush seems to know the way."

"Just think. We could find the princess *and* see a show!"

"This is actually the ideal hunting ground for a changeling. With ponies giving so much adoration to the performer, it's like an all-you-can-eat buffet!"

Twilight stopped at the front of the crowd.

"What's wrong?" Screwball asked.

The alicorn looked up. "The brush is pointing to the stage."

"Of course," Mothball uttered. "It's one thing to be in the audience for a performance, but to be the *performer* ! No pony gets more love

than a good performer!"

"So now what?" Screwball inquired. "Do we jump backstage?"

"Something about this stage," Twilight said, rubbing her chin. "It looks a little familiar…"

Trumpets were set on either side of the stage and the roof suddenly opened to reveal cardboard cutouts of stars and planets. A sign hung from the side of the caravan with a symbol that racked at Twilight's memory.

" *Come one, come all!* " a voice echoed.

The alicorn froze. "That voice…"

" *Mares and gentlecolts, cowponies and, uh…cows! Come and witness the amazing magic…* "

She grew pale. "No. It can't be."

"… *of the Great and Powerful TRRRRIXIE!* "

Okay, a lot of you expected it. Aw, man! I knew I was being too obvious!

I didn't want to delve too much into the big search, because with those three, I really don't think it would've taken long. And I wanted to use most of this chapter to expand more on Discord and Chrysalis' relationship.

Canter Creek is from Issues #25 and #26 of the MLP Comic series. I loved that arc so much, I just had to bring it up!

Confrontations and Complications

Now all will be explained.

Twilight's jaw dropped as the all-too-familiar blue unicorn in the purple hat and cape poofed onstage. The alicorn quickly hid behind Mothball and crouched to the ground. He and Screwball looked down at her in confusion.

"What's wrong?" Mothball asked.

" *Trixie* ?!" Twilight whispered. "Princess Bellatrix is *Trixie* ?!"

"You know her?"

" *Know* her? She once took over Ponyville!"

"Oh, was she the one with the Alicorn Amulet?" Screwball questioned. "I thought you said she turned good afterwards."

"She did, but…I haven't seen her in over twenty years and… Mothball, are you *sure* that's her?"

The disguised changeling turned to the unicorn performing onstage and inhaled deeply.

"That's Bellatrix, alright," he declared.

Screwball slapped herself in the forehead. "Oh, I get it! Bella *trix* ? *Trix* ie? Wow! This would've been so obvious if I had actually known this pony."

"It explains a lot. From what we found in her room, Bellatrix was a lover of magic. Like I said, she can get lots of love from an audience."

"So why are you hiding, Aunt Twilight?"

"I don't want to reveal myself until we're absolutely sure," the alicorn whispered.

"The brush is pointing right to her."

Sure enough, as Trixie moved across the stage, so did the hairbrush.

"And she has Bellatrix's scent," Mothball said.

"But…it just *can't* be," Twilight murmured. "I…I would've seen it! Right? It would explain why she hasn't really aged, but…she couldn't have been!"

"And now!" Trixie said to the crowd. "The Great and Powerful Trixie will now perform the most daring, most fantastical, most magnificent, most…!"

She paused and raised her nose, taking a sniff of the air. She looked down at the front row and went pale.

"Um, uh…" she stammered, her lip quivering. "And now the Great and Powerful Trixie will…disappear! Thank you, bye!"

She brought down her hooves and smoke appeared. Once it cleared, however, the trio could see her cape sweeping behind the curtain.

"Oh, no you don't!" Twilight hollered as she zoomed after her.

"Don't let her get away!" Screwball shouted as she and Mothball jumped onstage.

"Hey!" they heard from behind the curtain, followed by a thump.

As Screwball went backstage, Mothball looked back at the shocked audience and gave them a nervous grin.

"Um…that's all, folks!" he waved. "Just some, uh…family business! Move along! Nothing to see here!"

He jumped through the curtain to find Twilight pinning Trixie down,

her horn glowing dangerously.

"Unhoof me!" Trixie demanded. "The Great and Powerful Trixie will not stand for this outrage!"

"Cut the act, Trixie!" Twilight ordered. "If that is your real name!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb! I know you're Princess Bellatrix in disguise! What have you done with the real Trixie?!"

Trixie blinked, looking genuinely confused. "What?"

"The *real* Trixie! What have you done with her?!"

"Twilight, I *am* Trixie!"

"Don't give me that! I know you're a changeling pretending to be Trixie so you can…"

"No, you don't understand! Bellatrix *is* Trixie!"

Twilight cocked her head. "Excuse me?"

The blue unicorn sighed in defeat. "The Great and Powerful Trixie and Princess Bellatrix are one in the same. Trixie is Bellatrix and Bellatrix is Trixie."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you really that dense, Twilight? Bellatrix didn't get rid of Trixie and pretend to be her. Bellatrix *invented* Trixie! She was Bellatrix when she first came to Ponyville and she was Bellatrix when she wore the Alicorn Amulet. Trixie had been Bellatrix all along!"

"She's telling the truth," Screwball announced.

"Thank you, uh…pony with weird eyes? Now, would you please get *off* me?!"

Twilight stepped lightly off Trixie, or rather Bellatrix, allowing her to rise. The changeling princess brushed herself off and scowled at the

trio.

"It took you long enough to figure out I was a changeling," she said to the alicorn. "The question is: why come after me? And why bring my princely brother along?"

Mothball blinked as he changed into his true form. "How'd you know?"

She rolled her eyes. "Um, *hello* ?! You smell like mustard mixed with plumeria, insect repellant and dirty underwear! And since only the queen can produce children, of course you're my brother!"

"Gee, thanks."

"You smell great to me, honey!" Screwball exclaimed.

"And who is this?" Trixie/Bellatrix asked. "Your girlfriend?" She sniffed in Screwball's direction and hissed. "What kind of abomination is she?!"

The chaotic pony scowled. "I happen to be Screwball, the daughter of Discord, Lord of Chaos. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

The changeling princess put her hooves on her hips. "Really, little brother? The daughter of Mother's sworn enemy? And in the company of a princess of Equestria, no less! Mother will kick you out for sure when she finds out."

"She already did," Mothball explained. "But she didn't kick me out. I left the hive."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Typical. Mother just can't keep her little birds in the nest, can she? So what are you doing here, uh…?"

"Mothball."

She snorted. "Mothball? Mother named you *Mothball* ?! Well, after having thousands of children, I can imagine her running out of good names."

"So…if you've been a changeling this whole time," Twilight said,

"why didn't you use your transfiguration skills in your show?"

"Ugh! Because then you would've known I was a changeling, of course! You would've sent the royal guards after me! Of course, the Great and Powerful Trixie can handle herself, but Princess Bellatrix didn't have her fellow changelings to back her up!"

"But your aura. It's pink. All the changelings I've seen have a green aura."

"Oh. That." Trixie tapped her horn. "That was always a mystery to Mother too. Apparently, I was also born with purple eyes, even though most changeling eyes are either blue or green. Mother says I might've gotten them from my father." She huffed. "If only she could remember who he was."

"Yeah, that seems to be a trend," Mothball muttered.

"You still haven't told me why you're here. Didn't Bellatrix make it clear that she wanted nothing more to do with the changelings?"

"Chrysalis said you were banished," Screwball said.

"I was," Trixie groaned, turning away. "But after Trixie's last encounter with Twilight Sparkle, Bellatrix began rethinking things. Twilight could've punished Trixie, but she forgave her. Eventually, Bellatrix lost interest in being Queen and left the changelings for good."

Screwball raised an eyebrow. "Why do you keep referring to yourself in the third person?"

The changeling princess shot her a weary look. "You would too if you had been living a double life for twenty-five years."

Mothball cleared his throat. "You see, um…sis…"

"Don't call me that. Just…don't."

"Right. Anyway, we came here because…Mother is dying."

He waited for Trixie's reaction, but she didn't even flinch.

"How unfortunate," she said dryly. "Well, doesn't really come as much of a surprise. She lived for like a thousand years or something. I'd say it's about time."

"Sheesh," Screwball whispered to her fiancé. "She really is your mother's daughter. Seriously, if you gave her that echo effect, I'd think it was your mom talking!"

"Is that all you came to say? That Mother is dying? Am I to be invited to her funeral?"

"Geez, Trixie," Twilight said, scrunching her nose. "I mean I'm not so fond of Chrysalis either, but she's your *mother* for crying out loud!"

"I know that," Trixie grunted, turning around. "She's also the mare who's called me useless and weak my entire life! Did I not mention she kicked me out because I was 'unfit to rule?'"

"Yeah, about that," Mothball said, stepping forward. "We actually came to ask you to be Queen in her place."

The changeling princess raised an eyebrow. Then she threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh, I get it! This is a joke, right? You've come to play a joke on Bellatrix, huh? Make fun of the royal failure, huh?"

"No, we're surprisingly serious," Screwball said in annoyance.

"Mother asked for you personally," Mothball declared.

Trixie snorted. "Yeah, right. Like that mare would ask for *me* ! After all, she's got you, hasn't she? The perfect little prince she's so fond of?"

The prince groaned. Sister or not, he was really losing patience with this mare.

"I can't be King and marry Screwy."

"Ah, yes," Trixie smirked. "The classic Romeo and Juliet dilemma. Mother won't even let her undergo the transformation, eh?"

"Transformation?" Twilight questioned.

"I don't want that life for her!" Mothball said quickly.

"Can't blame you," Trixie said with a sigh. "As we both know, the life of a changeling is full of misery."

"So will you accept the throne or not?"

She huffed. "You're kidding, right? After decades of trying to please that control freak, you really think I'm going to follow in her hoofsteps?!"

"But…" Twilight uttered. "Didn't you always want power?"

"I *did* ," Trixie spat in her face, "but that was before… *you* !"

The alicorn jumped back. "Is this about that Ursa Minor again? Or the Alicorn Amulet?"

"Both and more! You have no idea what you did to Trixie, did you?! When Mother kicked Bellatrix out, she sought out to impress her in any way she could! So she became the Great and Powerful Trixie and won the adoration of millions, slowly building up power so she could show her mother what she was made of! But then *you* came along and showed her up that *no pony* would come and see her shows!

"So she found the Alicorn Amulet, which gave her enough power to take control of Ponyville, and later Equestria! What would impress her mother more than doing what she had failed to do in the past? But then you show me up *again* , destroying all chances Bellatrix had of winning back her crown!"

Trixie paused and hung her head. "But…all that power had twisted Bellatrix's heart. She became a monster and…felt sorry for it. She didn't think you'd forgive her, but you did and…that opened up new possibilities."

She began pacing the wagon. "Trixie tried to change, but she still had to eat. So she continued her show business. She even became a queen for a short while."

"Oh yeah," Twilight interjected. "Rainbow told me about that incident with the Diamond Dogs."

"But Trixie wasn't cut out to be a ruler! While it would've been enough to impress her mother, she just couldn't handle it! So…that was when she gave up her royal ambition."

"I'm confused," Screwball said, cradling her head. "I mean not just with trying to keep up with the dual personality thing, but are you mad at Aunt Twilight or not?"

Trixie scowled. "Oh, I'm *very* mad! At Mothbutt too! You see, Twilight…" She stuck her nose in the alicorn's face. "Perfect, little Twilight! You have so much power, Twilight! You should be *my* student, Twilight! Here's a pair of wings and a crown, Twilight! Twilight, Twilight, TWILIGHT!"

"I thought we were past this," said the alicorn. "Last time we met, you…"

"Trixie thought we were too! Trixie's not jealous of you, Twilight, but *Bellatrix* is! You were always so powerful, so perfect, that even my own *mother* favored you over me! Oh, yes! I know all about Mother's offer to make you her protégé! To top it all off, you were made a *princess* !"

She tuned to Mothball. "And *you* ! Mummy's little favorite! Don't deny it! You should've heard her raving about how powerful you were at such a young age! Why should Mother need Bellatrix when she's already got her perfect, precious prince and perfect princess protégé?!"

"Okay, lady," Screwball said, "you need to get a *grip* ! First off, it's not that hard to speak in the first person. Second, Twilight didn't accept Chrysalis' offer and third, this is your chance to finally prove your mother wrong! I mean look around you!"

She gestured around the room. "An old, rundown wagon with a limited amount of space? A greasy old stove? A bed with a moth-eaten blanket? A…gross, is that a chamber pot? You're not even getting that big of an audience! No offense, girl, but your life doesn't

look so hot. Wouldn't it be a big step up to be Queen of the Changelings? Heck, anything would be better than this cesspool! Even *my* home's not nearly as messy! If you accept the throne, wouldn't you be exchanging this life for a better one?"

Trixie hung her head. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

"What? What could possibly be holding you…?"

She was cut off as the wagon's side door opened. Mothball quickly put his disguise back on.

"Mom, I'm home!" a blue filly carrying a basket exclaimed. "I got the chili peppers, though they were out of white ones, but I got good deal on the…"

She trailed off when she realized they weren't alone. The filly looked about ten years old, possessing bright yellow eyes like an owl's. She was dressed most unusually, with a set of red rubber boots on all her hooves, a pair of white disco pants concealing her back legs and posterior, and a purple baseball cap sitting backwards on her head. They could not see her horn, but it was clear she was a unicorn since the basket of chili peppers was floating beside her, encased in a green aura. The hair curling out from under the cap was light blue and blue-gray and also curled down her neck.

Mothball sniffed the air and smelled the strange scent he had caught earlier.

The filly tilted her head at the trio. "Mom, what's going on?"

"Moonbeam," Trixie said, biting her lip nervously. "Sweetie, uh… Mummy's having a little meeting right now, so…"

"Hey wait," Moonbeam said, her face lighting up. "Is that Princess Twilight?!"

She dropped her basket and zoomed in front of the alicorn. She was jumping up and down in excitement.

"Oh my gosh! I am *such* a huge fan! You're like…the most amazing pony ever! Oh! Next to my mom, of course."

"Of…course," Twilight stammered, trying to wrap her head around what she was seeing.

Moonbeam turned to Screwball and gasped. "Wow! Look at your eyes!"

The chaotic pony grinned. "I would, but…they're kind of in my head."

The filly snorted. "I think they're cool! Ooh! And I like your hat!"

"Thanks. I like yours."

Moonbeam sniffed the air and turned to Mothball. "Hey, Mom! This guy smells like us! Only more underwear-y. Hey. How come you smell like underwear when you're not wearing any?"

"Moonbeam!" Trixie exclaimed, stomping her hoof. "Wait outside, would you?" She started pushing the filly gently out the door. "And remember, if you feel a sneeze coming on…"

"I duck out of sight," Moonbeam said, rolling her eyes as if they had gone through this before.

"Good girl. This won't take a minute."

"Can you get me Princess Twilight's autograph?"

Trixie groaned. "Yes, yes, Mummy will get you an autograph."

"What's she doing here anyway? Are you getting arrested again?"

"Just wait outside!"

After giving her a final push, Trixie slammed the door. Then she sighed as she leaned her forehead against it.

"Your daughter?" Twilight asked.

Trixie nodded.

"How old?"

"Nine."

"And the father?"

Trixie sighed again as she stepped away from the door. "Doesn't even know."

"Is she a…?" Mothball started to ask.

"Yes."

"But she looks just like you," Twilight said. "I mean… *this* you."

"Well," Trixie heaved as she faced the trio, "Moonbeam's a…special case. She came as a surprise, really. I didn't think I'd be able to reproduce until after I received the Royal Blessing. The day Moonbeam came…well…it's a good thing I wasn't in a hospital, or else she would've shocked the nurses. Yes, she has a changeling form, but…I guess her DNA got confused.

"See, I had spent so much time in this pony form that when she came out, she not only resembled my disguise, but had a few of… her father's traits. But when she sneezed, she turned into a changeling larva. I swear, I thought I was going nuts! But it kept happening every time she sneezed. She has no control over her transformations whatsoever."

"So why the get-up?" Screwball asked.

Trixie bit her lip. "There are…some things she can't even hide in her pony form."

"But she's still a royal, right?" Mothball inquired.

"Of course, she is. I certainly didn't make her on my *own* , did I?"

"But doesn't this make you a better candidate for Queen?" Screwball questioned. "I mean you've already got the heir part covered."

Trixie scowled. "I am *not* subjecting my daughter to that life! I will not have her growing up with high hopes, only to have them crushed in the end!"

"Does she know about changelings?" Mothball asked.

"Oh, she knows what we are, but I haven't told her…everything. She doesn't know we're royals, or about the hive, let alone about Mother. But she knows how vital it is that we hide ourselves, in order to avoid being ostracized. Luckily, she doesn't need a lot of love to keep her going and can survive on regular food, but I've never had her feed on any pony. She's a good soul and if she knew she had the capability to hurt some pony…"

She folded her hooves and turned away. "So you see why I can't accept the throne. It will only bring my daughter to ruin."

Twilight stared at her for a long time. "What's happened to you, Trixie?"

"You want me to go over the whole backstory again?" Trixie snorted.

"No, I mean, why do you seem so…cold?"

She shrugged. "A lot's changed over the years."

"Yes, but…the Trixie I knew was so full of passion and you're…I don't know what it is, but if not for the frustration, I'd almost say you were…emotionless."

Trixie gave her an annoyed look. " *You're* the genius, Twilight. *You* figure it out."

Mothball had an idea and used the spell to help him see her loved ones. He had at least thought Moonbeam would come up, but he saw nothing. He looked sympathetically at Trixie.

"You don't have a heart, do you?"

Trixie turned away. Twilight's eyes widened in shock.

"But…no! I mean last time we met, you were so…remorseful and… and crying and…"

"I had a heart *then* ," the changeling princess snapped, "but not anymore! Okay?!"

"So wait," Mothball said. "You were born with a heart? And knew

about it?"

"Of course I knew I had a heart! I mean what idiot would grow up not knowing they had a heart?"

The prince blushed.

"What happened?" Screwball asked.

Trixie sighed. "Ten years ago, I returned to the hive and asked my mother to remove my heart. She did it, thinking making me emotionless would help me become a better changeling. I'll confess, I *was* thinking of returning, but…once I was devoid of most of my emotions, I began thinking logically. Mother never cared for me. She just wanted a piece of clay to mold into a copy of herself. I would never be what she wanted me to be, so…I told her I was done."

"But why? Why have your heart ripped out?"

Twilight was the first to answer. "Moonbeam's father. He broke your heart, didn't he?"

Trixie said nothing for a while. Then she straightened up.

"Look, I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing, but I am *never* going back to that insane asylum. So if you have nothing more to say, I suggest you leave."

I was originally going to use an OC for Chrysalis' daughter, but then I wondered: "What if it was someone we already knew?" Trixie came to mind since she's a "reformed" villain and a loner and the more I thought about it...it would explain SO much (plus, she and Chrysalis have the same voice actress)! That's why I had Twilight come along on the journey, because she knew Trixie. I've also been dying to write on Trixie's character, because even though she's a little annoying, I find her compelling. There is more to her backstory that will be explained later, and yes, you WILL find out who Moonbeam's father is.

What Now?

Because college is back in session, the best I can do is one chapter a week. And to the Guest who said this was "too inappropriate," you do see the T rating, right?

"Well that was rude," Screwball huffed once she and the others were outside Trixie's wagon. "She didn't need to slam the door in our faces!"

"You shouldn't've called her a two-faced, mopey, identity-confused coward," Mothball murmured.

"She had it coming! Now what are we gonna do?"

Twilight shrugged. "We can't force her to change her mind."

"Yeah, we can! Ain't you ever heard of positive punishment? I brought the duct tape."

"Screwy, let's just forget it," Mothball said.

She turned to him in confusion. "Forget it? What do you mean 'forget it?'"

"Look, it's obvious that Bellatrix, Trixie, whoever she is, doesn't want the throne, and I don't think any amount of duct tape is going to change her mind."

"Well, we gotta try *something* ! Otherwise, the changelings won't stop bothering us until you agree to be King!"

"Maybe I *should* be King."

Mothball quickly covered his mouth with his hoof, but it was too late. Screwball's eyes narrowed and her teeth gritted together.

" *What* ?!" she spat.

Mothball sent Twilight a glance and saw that she was already slowly backing away, not wanting to get involved. He was on his own for this one.

"I mean…" he stammered, facing his fiancée again. "Well…like Twilight said, if I were King, I could change the colony for the better."

"Yeah, but…" Screwball said in a cracked voice, not believing what her love was saying. "If you become King… *I'd* have to become a changeling!"

"But would that really be so bad?"

She gasped. "You said you liked me the way I was!"

"I do! But it's not like we'd be changing everything about you and we'd still be together. Isn't that all that matters?"

She paused, tears developing in her spiral eyes. "What if…what if I don't want that for us? Would you…would you replace me with some changeling girl?"

He was taken aback. "Screwy, you know I wouldn't…"

"But you *would* , wouldn't you?! After all, you have to 'keep the species going,' right?!" She held up her ringed hoof. "And *this* ?! Does this mean *nothing* to you?!"

"Of course, it does! You have any idea how long it took me to raise the bits for that?!" He folded his hooves. "But apparently, it doesn't mean much to *you* !"

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I thought that when ponies got married, they would love and accept each other no matter what! Where one goes, the other follows! I don't know if you've noticed, Screwy, but I'm a Prince of the Changelings, and whether I like it or not, it's a part of me! And if you can't accept that, then maybe you don't love me as much as I thought!"

Screwball's eyes were now completely glazed in water. At the sight

of them, Mothball immediately regretted what he had said.

"Screwy, I didn't mean it like…"

"Fine!" she snapped. "If that's what you think of me, then…then…"

She grunted as she tugged the amethyst ring off her hoof and slammed it to the ground. Mothball stood frozen in shock as he watched his love stomp away.

"Where are you going?" Twilight asked as Screwball passed her.

The chaotic pony came to a stop. "I don't know!"

"Well, we can't go anywhere now. It'll be dark soon. We should make camp for the night."

"Fine."

A small pink tent materialized. Twilight peered in and realized it was bigger on the inside with a kitchen, living room and two adjoining bedrooms. Mothball was about to follow the mares in when Screwball's furious head poked out.

"Oh no, you don't!" she exclaimed. "You're sleeping in *there* !"

She pointed to a simple, brown tent even smaller than the pink one appeared on the outside. He trotted over to it and looked inside. The space was as small as it should've been and on the ground lay a pillow and a blanket covered in moths. He groaned at Screwball's cruel sense of humor.

"Can we talk about this?" he called out to her.

"NO!" Screwball screamed before disappearing into her tent.

Mothball huffed and crawled into his tiny living space for the night. He shooed the moths away and curled up on the blanket. Then he frowned and turned back to himself as he lifted the ring with his magic so that it was floating above him.

A familiar feeling returned to him, one he hadn't felt for five years.

He had felt it the night he had betrayed Screwball to the changelings.

Guilt.

"Oh, Screwy," he sighed sadly. "I *really* screwed up this time, didn't I?"

Then he began to silently cry, thinking of how Screwball would've laughed at that unintentional pun.

"So what was that all about?" Moonbeam asked her mother. "I mean it's cool that you got me Princess Twilight's autograph, but what was she doing here in the first place?"

Trixie sighed. "Twilight and I…have a bit of a history."

The filly's eyes widened as she dropped the signed picture in her hooves. "What?! You *know* Princess Twilight and never *told* me?!"

"It was a long time ago! And she wasn't a princess back then."

"Unbelievable! But still, why was she here?"

Trixie took a frying pan from a shelf and set it on the greasy stove. "Hand Mummy the chili peppers, will you?"

Moonbeam narrowed her eyes, seeing that her mother was ignoring her questions as usual. Nevertheless, she was hungry and levitated the shopping basket over to her. After spraying some oil on the pan, Trixie lifted a bunch of peppers out of the basket and laid them neatly in the pan.

"Do you want them lightly fried or deep fried tonight?"

"Lightly," Moonbeam replied, folding her hooves. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing. You're avoiding the topic again."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Trixie said dryly.

"Yeah, you do! Whenever you don't wanna talk about something, you shut me out and do something like start dinner! Why were Princess Twilight and those other ponies visiting you? And why'd you shove them out like they were tax collectors or something? No pony in their right mind would kick a *princess* out!"

"You forget who we are, Moonbeam. Do you have any idea what would've happened if you had sneezed in front of the princess?"

"Ah, come on. She wouldn't…"

Moonbeam sniffed as her mother started shaking pepper into the pan.

"Achoo!"

As she sneezed, green flames whooshed up her body. Her mane remained the same color, but had become flat and webby. Her body was now sleek and black, a green beetle shell and holed, transparent wings on her back. Her eyes were still yellow, but the pupils had narrowed into slits. If her horn, tail and hooves had changed, no sign was given, as they were still concealed by her odd clothes. A second sneeze came and she returned to her pony form.

"See?" Trixie said. "You've got to learn to control that. If any pony sees what you really are, you'll be sent on a one-way trip to the Canterlot dungeon! A *princess* witnessing this would make absolutely sure that would happen!"

Moonbeam sighed as she dropped onto her rear. "Okay, I get it. Still, why do I have to wear this dumb stuff? The hat I can live with, but these boots are pinchy! And my tail keeps running up my…"

"Don't!" her mother warned.

"My point is that what's so bad about the stuff I can't hide when I'm a pony? It's not like they'll know I'm a changeling if any pony sees."

Trixie sighed. "You'll still be ostracized, Moonbeam. Once ponies see what's underneath all those clothes, they'll laugh at you, ridicule you, to a point where you'll feel small and," she said the last word in a whisper, "worthless."

"Maybe it won't be like that," the filly insisted. "After all, there's always a half-something walking or flying around Ponyville. You've got eagle-lions, scorpion-lions—lot of part-lion guys—and wasn't Daddy a…?"

Trixie spun around and glared down at her child. "DON'T! I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, Moonbeam. We are never to speak of the big 'D' word! EVER!"

Moonbeam flinched at her mother's outburst. Then Trixie sighed as she shook her head.

"Trust me, Moonbeam," she said softly. "When you're older, you'll understand these things."

She turned back to the stove and Moonbeam knew that meant the discussion was closed for the moment. The filly moaned sadly as she stood up and walked to the door. She threw open the upper part and gazed out. Her eyebrows shot up in surprise when she discovered two tents set up outside.

"Mom," she called. "Some pony's camping out there. I think it's Princess Twilight and those other two."

"What?!" Trixie exclaimed, dropping her pan and coming to the window.

She gazed out, and sure enough, Mothball, in his pegasus disguise, popped his head out of the brown tent to stare across at the pink one.

"Ugh," Trixie groaned. "They just don't give up, do they?"

"Can we invite them over for dinner?" Moonbeam asked eagerly.

"No!"

"Please? We never have *any pony* over for dinner!"

"And for good reason!" her mother snapped as she returned to the stove.

"Come on, Mom!" the filly begged. "It's *Princess Twilight* ! We'd be dining with royalty!"

Trixie momentarily snorted at the irony of that statement, but held her sternness.

"We're not inviting them to dinner, and that's final!"

Moonbeam narrowed her eyes at her mother. Then she pushed open the lower door so she could trot outside.

"You never let me have any friends," she mumbled.

It wasn't that she didn't love her mother. They had been through a lot together and Moonbeam knew she cared about her well-being. After all, they were all each other had. She just wished she wasn't so cold most of the time. She knew her mother loved her, but also that she was hiding a lot. Her mother hadn't revealed much about her life before Moonbeam was born. She had never discussed her childhood, only that both her parents were gone, and the subject of Moonbeam's father was especially delicate. All she knew was that he had left before her mother had realized her pregnancy, and that Moonbeam had him to thank for the way she looked.

Well, not the changeling part, anyway.

Moonbeam was well aware of the consequences of revealing that part of herself. Changelings were not welcome in Equestria, because their shapeshifting powers were considered a threat. However, she didn't see the harm in taking her hat, pants and boots off. It was so annoying wearing these things all the time, and her mother could have at least chosen a more comfortable disguise. Yet her mother scolded her every time she tried removing her clothes in public.

There wouldn't be much point, anyway. She would still be friendless. With all the touring in the wagon, they had never stayed in one place for long, and few ponies her age came to her mother's shows. Every time she had the opportunity to make friends, however, her mother would call her away. She worried Moonbeam would sneeze and expose herself if she stayed around ponies for too long.

Well, Moonbeam wasn't going to give up. Even if these ponies weren't her age, they interested her. Not just the princess, but her companions. The one with the swirly eyes was especially intriguing, and the similarities between the green pegasus stallion's scent and her own peaked her curiosity. Her mother had forbidden her from inviting them to dinner, but she hadn't said anything about paying them a visit.

She went to the brown tent first and popped her head in.

"Hi!"

The pegasus stallion jumped with a yelp and tucked something behind his back, but Moonbeam had already seen the doll. She ignored this, however, and smiled brightly.

"Whatchya doin'?"

The stallion took a moment to recuperate. "Oh, it's you."

"Mind if I come in?"

He shrugged and scooted over so she could have space to enter. Moonbeam glanced around with a grimace on her face.

"Wow, this place is worse than the wagon," she said as she sat down beside him. "I would've thought the princess' buddies would be sleeping somewhere more…glamorous."

Mothball groaned. "Let's just say I'm in a time-out."

She raised her eyebrows. "Princess Twilight put you in a time-out?"

"Not Twilight. My…fiancée."

Moonbeam glanced outside and then back at him. "You mean that mare with the lollipop eyes?"

He chuckled a bit. "That's what *I* call 'em."

"Who is she, by the way?"

"Screwball. She's the daughter of Discord."

Her eyebrows went higher. "You mean that chaos guy? No way!"

"Way."

"Wow. Oh wait, I remember! This Discord dude married one of the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, didn't he?" She frowned. "But then she died."

"What?"

"Mom tells me that story every now and then. Not a very nice ending."

"Mom didn't die! I mean…Fluttershy didn't die! I mean she kinda did, but she isn't, and…the point is she's still alive!"

"Really?" Moonbeam said, tilting her head. "Huh. Wonder why Mom told me that. Must've been poetic license. Hey, what's your name, by the way?"

He hesitated. Trixie probably didn't want him revealing everything to her daughter, but then figured there was no harm in telling her his name.

"Mothball," he said, holding out his hoof.

She grinned and shook his hoof enthusiastically. "I'm Moonbeam! Nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you too, Moonbeam."

"So how do you know my mom?"

He froze. Now what should he do? He couldn't reveal that he was her royal half-brother. Then again, was it so wrong to at least admit his relation to her? It was only now just starting to sink in that he was this little filly's uncle.

He was an uncle. She was his niece.

She should have the right to at least know that, right?

"I'm, uh…" he stammered, biting his lip. "I'm kinda her brother."

One eyebrow went up this time. "No way. Mom doesn't have any brothers or sisters."

Mothball sighed. "Well, I guess that's half true. We hadn't even officially met until today. See, I'm her *half* -brother."

" *Half* -brother?"

"Same mother, different father."

"You can't be my uncle. To be my uncle, you'd have to be a…"

She paused and took another sniff at him. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Are you…?"

He smiled. "That's right."

She narrowed her eyes skeptically and crossed her hooves. "Prove it."

He shrugged. "Okay."

He transformed into his changeling self and Moonbeam's jaw dropped.

"Oh my gosh," she uttered. "You *are* my uncle!"

Mothball smirked. "Told ya so."

Her face glowed as she grinned. "This is incredible! I've never had an uncle before!"

"Well, I've never had a niece before."

"So Uncle Mothy…may I call you Uncle Mothy?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Uncle Mothy, can you tell me stuff about my grandma? Mom doesn't talk about my grandparents much, just that they died before I was born. But I didn't think there were other changelings in Equestria, or that one of them would be my uncle!"

Mothball wasn't sure how to respond. He knew Trixie was keeping things from her daughter, but he didn't think it'd be *this* much. Should he tell her? She was looking up at him with hopeful eyes and didn't want to disappoint her.

He'd seen Discord play the role of an uncle with the foals of Fluttershy's friends. That usually involved taking them for rides on motorcycles or giving them gifts such as stuffed animals that spat jelly at adult ponies. Sometimes he would just sit with them on the couch and tell them wacky stories. Was that what Mothball should be for Moonbeam? That cool male adult figure that would show and tell her exciting, interesting things?

"I, uh…" he started to say.

"Moonbeam!"

The two jumped and turned to the exit to see Trixie's angry head poking through.

"How many times have I told you not to go wandering…?" She froze at the sight of Mothball in his changeling form. "What do you think you're…?"

"Isn't it great, Mom?" Moonbeam said excitedly. "Mothy here is a changeling too!"

Trixie glared at her half-brother and then at her daughter. "Moonbeam, come out here this instant!"

The filly rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay. But can't Uncle Mothy join us for dinner?"

Her mother raised an eyebrow. " *Uncle Mothy* ?"

"Yeah. He told me that you're brother and sister."

Her glare went back to Mothball and she gritted her teeth. "Did he, now?"

"So can't he stay? It's not every day we have family over, and I wanna find out more about my grandparents and…"

Trixie's eyes widened before narrowing again. "That's enough! Come out here, now! I'd like a talk with… *Uncle Mothy* ."

Moonbeam sighed as she rose to her hooves. "Fine."

Once the filly was out of the tent, Trixie stepped in, her eyes burning into Mothball's.

"You showed her that you were a changeling?" she growled.

"I didn't tell her about the hive or how we're royalty," he insisted, holding up his hooves. "I just felt she should know we're related."

She stepped further in so she was just inches from his face. "Why are you all still here? Didn't Bellatrix make it perfectly clear that she does not want to associate herself with the hive anymore?"

"Look, you don't want the throne, I understand. We've just been traveling all day and need rest. Besides, I…" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I've actually been rethinking Mother's offer…"

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "What about that little girlfriend of yours?"

"Well…"

He levitated the amethyst ring for her to see.

"Oh," she scoffed. "No wonder you're sleeping in separate tents. What happened? You and Miss Juliet weren't in the same place?"

"Let's not talk about that," he said, dropping the ring. "Why do you keep lying to Moonbeam?"

She rolled her eyes. "I thought I had already established that! I don't want her to get tangled up in…"

"Not about changelings, but…other things."

"What do you mean?"

"She told me about one of your bedtime stories. The one about Mom and Discord?"

"Excuse me?" she said, cocking her head. "I never tell her stories about Mother, especially her history with Discord."

"No, I mean *Fluttershy* and Discord."

She scoffed. "You call that wimpy pegasus *Mom* ?"

"She's not wimpy, and yes! She's been taking care of me since I left the hive, but that's not the point. Why'd you tell Moonbeam she had died?"

Trixie looked away from him. "What's the use of giving her false hope in a world where happy endings don't exist?"

He blinked. "So you tell her stories with sad endings like that?"

Her glare returned. "How I raise my daughter is none of your business. You stay away from her, or I swear, Bellatrix will tear you limb from limb!"

On that note, she turned on her heel and started to leave.

"You know, for someone who doesn't have a heart, you seem to care a lot about your daughter."

She paused for a moment. Then she turned her head slightly and said in an almost regretful tone:

"There's a difference between caring for some pony and loving some pony."

Then she opened the flap and went outside. Moonbeam was waiting, staring up at her mother with narrowed eyes and a pouted lip.

"What?" Trixie grunted.

"You never let me hang out with any pony," her daughter complained, "and I get why, but when some pony who knows our secret comes along, you do the same thing! Why can't Uncle Mothy come to dinner? Why?"

"Moonbeam, you don't under…"

"Please, please, please, please, please, please…!"

Trixie rolled her eyes as the filly wrapped her hooves around her foreleg. She knew she was never going to hear the end of this, so she had no choice.

"Ugh! Alright! He can come to dinner!"

Moonbeam clapped her front boots together. "Yay! Ooh! Princess Twilight and Screwball too?"

"Sweetie…"

"Please, please, please, please…!"

"Fine! They can come too! But on one condition." She knelt down to her. "You are *not* to discuss *anything* about changelings, alright?"

"But he knows we're…"

"Moonbeam…"

The filly sighed. "Fine. I won't bring it up."

"Good girl. Now go inside and keep an eye on the peppers."

Moonbeam rolled her eyes as she complied with her mother's request. Trixie moaned as she poked her head back in Mothball's tent.

"Congratulations," she grumbled. "You're invited to dinner." Mothball opened his mouth to speak. "But you are *not* to talk about the hive, or Mother, or anything regarding our changeling heritage!"

Mothball shook his head. "I won't."

She nodded and disappeared.

"But *you* should," he finished under his breath.

Trixie trotted over to the pink tent and peered in. "Twilight, you…"

She trailed off when she got a good look at the amount of space inside.

"What the…?"

"Daughter of Chaos," Twilight said from a purple couch, tilting her head toward one of the bedrooms.

"Right," Trixie said, shaking her head. "Anyway, Moonbeam wants you losers to join us for dinner."

The alicorn grinned politely. "We'd be delighted to join you."

"Don't think this means anything, Twilight! You are not to talk about the changelings with my daughter, and when the sun rises tomorrow, Trixie expects to see you and your logic-defying tents gone!"

Sorry for that fight in the beginning, but it was bound to happen. You should also know that there isn't going to be much action in this fic, because I want to focus more on the characters. Moonbeam actually wasn't supposed to have much in this chapter, but she just chimed in.

Family Dinner

I did warn you updates might not be as frequent.

Half an hour later, Trixie, Moonbeam, Mothball, Twilight and Screwball were sitting at a picnic table, which Screwball had begrudgingly conjured, eating the fried chili peppers Trixie had prepared. Trixie sat between Moonbeam and Mothball on one side while Twilight and Screwball sat across, the latter wanting to be as far away from her ex-fiancé as possible. He was sending her a pleading look, only to get a deadly glare in return. He was pretty sure that she had a voodoo doll under the table, because every now and then, he would feel a prick on his flank. Trixie was sending glares to both Mothball and Twilight, while the alicorn was looking down at her plate, trying to ignore the tension.

It would've been a quiet meal, had Moonbeam not been chatting excitedly away.

"This is so much fun! We've never had anyone over for dinner before! Well, except for this one time when these two weird dudes showed up and wouldn't stop bowing to Mom and kept calling her the GAPT and they kept going on and on about how great she was and they wouldn't go away until the CMC—you know, that old band?—dragged them away. What were their names, Mom? I think one of them was called Snail or something…"

"So how you liking your peppers?" Trixie asked, though it was clear she was just desperate to change the subject.

"They're delicious!" Twilight piped.

"Honestly," Mothball said as he cautiously touched a pepper with his hoof, "I'm not a big fan of chili peppers." He smiled nervously at Screwball. "You know, unless they're…dipped in chocolate?"

She looked at him wearily and then gazed down at her dish.

Mothball frowned and did the same.

"Though I'm curious," Twilight told Trixie. "I thought change…I mean ponies of your kind didn't eat a lot of…real food."

"It varies," Trixie replied, popping a pepper into her mouth. "Chili peppers are very spicy, like," she smirked teasingly at the alicorn, "a certain kind of…love."

Twilight blushed and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"I, personally, prefer the sweet type," Mothball said, looking hopefully at Screwball. "Like a big old chocolate shake?"

She didn't respond, nor did she seem to acknowledge him.

"Really?" he sighed. "You're gonna let me starve?"

Screwball picked up her plate. "I'll take this inside."

Mothball watched sadly as she vanished into the pink tent. He stood up to follow her when Twilight grabbed his hoof and looked at him sympathetically.

"Give her time to cool down," she whispered. "Then you can both work things out."

Mothball sighed and slowly sat back down.

"So Princess Twilight," Moonbeam piped, seemingly oblivious to the recent drama, "Mom tells me you two know each other."

"Oh, just Twilight's fine," the alicorn said with a smile. "And yes, you see, your mother came to Ponyville and said that…"

She trailed off when she noticed Trixie frantically shaking her head.

"Uh…well, she was putting on quite a show and I was greatly impressed with her magic! Oh, and she also saved me from this Ursa Minor that was rampaging through town."

Trixie blinked at Twilight's words while Moonbeam's eyes widened in

delight.

"Really? Mom, you saved a *princess* ?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Oh, but I wasn't a princess…" Twilight started to say.

"What other awesome things did Mom do?"

"Oh, Moonbeam," Trixie said with a nervous smile, "you don't wanna hear that boring stuff…"

"Typical Trixie," Twilight snorted. "Always so modest!"

"Don't push it," Trixie said through her teeth.

"And how do *you* know Princess Twilight, Uncle Mothy?" Moonbeam inquired.

"Oh," Mothball responded quietly. "She's…"

"I'm Screwball's godmother," Twilight finished for him. "She and Mothball asked me to help them find your mother so that she could…"

Trixie's eyes seemed to flash when they glared at the alicorn.

"How can you not know you had a half-brother, Mom?" Moonbeam asked.

"Mother had him after I left home," Trixie muttered.

"Left home? You told me Grandma died."

Trixie froze for a second. Mothball came up with a quick fib.

"She did. Just, uh, after she left and a short time before you were born."

"Oh," Moonbeam said, though she was still staring at her mother suspiciously. "So hey, Uncle Mothy, how come you're still hiding yourself? I mean we all know what you are, so…"

"Uh," Mothball uttered, glancing around nervously, "I'm not really

comfortable with showing myself in public…"

"Aw, come on! No pony's around! I would change now but that only happens when I sneeze. Ooh! But I can show you something else cool!"

Trixie gasped as Moonbeam's hoof went to her hat.

"MOONBEAM INSECTRA LULAMOON, DON'T YOU DARE!"

The filly shrank at her mother's outburst and slowly lowered her hoof. Twilight looked back down at her dish and whistled innocently.

Mothball heaved a heavy sigh as he tried to enjoy his food. He was beginning to miss mealtime with Screwball's family.

Meanwhile, at the Castle of Chaos, Twinkle and Zany were engaged in an ultimate food fight.

"Eat my cheesy carrots!" Zany yelled, summoning mini-catapults to fling said cheese-covered carrots.

Twinkle tried to dodge but let out a shriek as one grazed her ear.

"You'll pay for that!" she exclaimed, slamming her hoof on the table.

Zany yelped as Twinkle's silverware hurled towards him. He ducked as they stuck to the back of his chair. He rose and growled as his bowl of nacho cheese began taking a monstrous form.

"Children, stop it!" Fluttershy commanded. "I've told you a million times—Zany, turn that cheese back to normal! Twinkle, put down that chair! Kids!"

Discord only watched with weary eyes. Usually he would take pleasure in such a chaotic display, but his heart wasn't in it. His recent encounter with Chrysalis had put him in a stale state, and he also worried about Screwball. He knew she could protect herself out there, but if she and the others failed to find the changeling princess, she might lose her true love. He knew all too well what that was like

and didn't want Screwball to go through the same painful experience. That was probably why he was always so shaky about her relationship with Mothball. He just didn't want his little girl to get hurt.

Then a voice inside his head told him she would be fine. Mothball was a good boy, though Discord rarely admitted that out loud. He would never hurt her intentionally. Still, if the boy had to choose duty over desire, Discord worried what effect that would have on Screwball.

"Well, goodnight," Trixie said bluntly after clearing up the dishes.

"Maybe you can join us for breakfast tomorrow!" Moonbeam said excitedly to their guests. "We can have strawberries and whipped cream…"

"Moonbeam! Go inside!"

The filly groaned and obeyed her mother. Before she went in, however, she waved to Twilight and Mothball.

"See ya tomorrow!"

Once she was sure her daughter was out of hearing, Trixie turned to Twilight.

"Hey, um…thanks for telling Moonbeam all that good stuff about Trixie, but you didn't have to…"

The alicorn held up her hoof. "It wasn't my place to tell her of your past. However, it's only a matter of time before she finds out the truth. The question is: who is going to be the one to tell her?"

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Don't lecture Trixie, Twilight. If you were a mother, you'd understand."

"Actually, I am a mother. I have a three-year-old filly at home."

The unicorn snorted. "Nevertheless, Trixie's still had more

experience than you."

She stomped into the wagon and slammed the door behind her. Twilight shook her head in pity.

"Hey, uh," Mothball uttered, "could you maybe…talk to Screwy for me?"

The alicorn smiled softly as she laid a hoof on his shoulder. "I'll soften her up a bit, but you should think about what you're going to say to her."

The changeling nodded in thanks and went into his tent. Twilight lifted the flap to hers and found Screwball in one of the bedrooms, curled up on a queen-sized bed covered with a purple comforter. The alicorn sighed a she cautiously approached her.

"Screwy…" she started to say.

"I'm not talking to him!" Screwball snapped. "You heard what he said! He doesn't think I love him enough!"

"I'm sure he didn't mean…"

"Does he really think that?!" she demanded, sitting up. "I mean after all I've done for him?! When we were first getting to know each other, I disobeyed my parents sneaking out to meet him every night! When he left the hive, I convinced my parents to let him stay with us! Did I mention we faced a changeling army together?!"

"Yet you're not willing to make changes for him."

"He wants me to become an entirely new species! That's a lot to ask from some pony!"

"It is, but if it's necessary for the two of you to be together, isn't it worth the risk?"

Screwball bit her lip. "Well…"

Twilight sighed and sat on the bed. "Love requires sacrifice. You know I gave up my immortality so I could be with Flash, right?"

"I still can't believe you did that," Screwball muttered, "because you know that means I'll have one less aunt around when I'm like a thousand and one, right?"

"And yet I would outlive Flash by many eons."

"Why didn't you just ask him to be immortal? Daddy did that with Mom."

"That came to mind, but…it only worked on your mother because Discord had a strong emotional connection with her. You do realize that's another example of sacrifice, right? Your parents had the option of making Fluttershy immortal, having Discord relinquish his own immortality, or leaving well enough alone so that he may outlive her. Your mother made the choice of living for eternity with your father, even though that meant she would outlive all her friends. She knew she couldn't just let the last draconequus in the world die."

Twilight hung her head. "And you've seen what would happen if Discord ever lost Fluttershy."

Screwball nodded. "Okay, okay, so you and mom have made big decisions for the ones you love. You saying I should be okay with becoming a changeling?"

"I'm not telling you what to do, Screwy, but think about the sacrifices Mothball has made for you. He left the only family he has ever known behind so he could be with you, and has now traveled to the ends of Equestria so you wouldn't have to change yourself. Heck, he even had enough guts to put up living with your family! Don't you think it's time you returned the favor?"

Screwball stared at her godmother for a moment and then laid her head back down, facing away from her.

"The decision is yours," Twilight continued, "but you can't leave this conflict between you and Mothball unresolved. Flash and I made that mistake once and it nearly destroyed us. Think about it."

She heard the alicorn rise from the bed and trot away. Screwball's face fell as she looked at her left hoof. It looked so bare without

Mothball's ring. She thought about what he said he had done to get the ring. He had worked so hard to get her something special, and every time she had given him something special, it was something she had poofed out of thin air with no effort whatsoever.

He had abandoned his crown, his family, his life. What had she ever done for him?

"Come on, Mom!" Moonbeam complained as she sat on the bed, trying to get her boots off. "Why can't they join us for breakfast?"

"They'll be gone before then," her mother replied as she put the dishes away. "If they know what's good for them."

"I don't get it, Mom. A princess, a magic earth pony *and* a long-lost relative show up out of the blue! How can you *not* be excited? We have new friends, and…"

"Those ponies are *not* our friends, Moonbeam! You have no idea why they even came here!"

"Then why don't you tell me?"

Trixie winced. "It…it doesn't matter! Besides, they're gonna be gone before…"

"Mom, I think these things are stuck."

Trixie turned to see her daughter having a hard time prying off the boots. Even when she used magic, they wouldn't budge. Trixie smirked as she approached her.

"Hold still."

She lit up her horn and gently removed the boots one by one. Moonbeam sighed in relief as she flexed her black cloven hooves. Trixie's pink aura then enveloped the filly's pants and slid them off. Moonbeam stood on the bed and swished her thin, cow-like tail with a small tuft of dark and light blue hair much like her mane. Trixie then removed the baseball cap and Moonbeam touched the point of

her gray horn as if to check it was still there.

"Phew!" she heaved. "Much better! I think that stuff's gotten too small for me."

"Alright, we'll go shopping tomorrow," Trixie said as she hung up her cape.

"You know, I think the princess and Uncle Mothy would've understood if I had…"

"Stop calling him that."

"But I'm sure they've seen weirder things…"

"They wouldn't've understood."

"But…"

"Now get into bed!"

Moonbeam groaned as she and her mother crawled into their small bed and pulled the old blanket over their bodies.

"It's been a long day," Trixie said, wrapping her hooves around her daughter. "Let's get some sleep."

"Could you at least tell me a story?" Moonbeam asked as she snuggled against her mother.

She sighed. "Okay, um… Once upon a time, there was a princess… who wanted nothing more than to please her mother, the Queen. However, the Queen didn't think her daughter was good enough, and so she banished her. Years later, a pony from the princess' old kingdom found her and told her that the Queen was dead and she was next in line for the throne. But…she couldn't accept it."

"How come?"

Trixie sighed. "She had made a new life for herself and didn't want it ruined."

"So then what happened?"

She turned away. "She died."

Moonbeam rolled her eyes. "You really need to tell better stories, Mom. They all end the same."

"Well, that's all I've got. Now go to sleep."

It didn't take long for Moonbeam to doze off, but Trixie's eyes remained wide awake. She watched her daughter as she slept and smiled slightly at her innocence. She brushed the filly's mane aside and frowned at the gray, bony horn sticking out of her head. Every odd part of her, those parts that never changed no matter what form she took, would always be terrible reminders *him,* and of the decision she had made long ago. She quickly rearranged her daughter's mane so the horn wouldn't be visible.

Trixie's eyes wandered around the wagon and fell upon the mirror leaning against the wall. She could see her reflection, or rather the reflection of her disguise. She remembered the first time she had seen that reflection, the day she had left home, the day the Great and Powerful Trixie had been born.

Then, after a quick glance at Moonbeam to make sure she was sound asleep, she changed. Just for a moment, to look at the changeling she had left behind. Her purple eyes now had slits, her hair was now green and stringy, and her body was now black and deformed. She shook her head and quickly changed back. She smiled at the unicorn in the mirror, turned back to her daughter and closed her eyes.

As she dreamt, memories of the past came flooding back.

I was planning to keep Moonbeam's oddities a secret for longer, but I wanted a moment where Trixie and Moonbeam react differently to them.

A lot of you complained about how Screwball acted in the last chapter. Come on, she's not perfect!

Next chapter will take a while, but I will tell you that you will learn more about Bellatrix/Trixie in it.

Bellatrix

The origin of Bellatrix/Trixie:

When Chrysalis first laid eyes on the royal larva with purple eyes, she was delighted to at last have an heir to ascend the throne when she was gone. She planned to train her daughter into becoming a great and powerful ruler that would lead the changelings into battle for Equestria. So she named her Bellatrix, meaning "female warrior."

She wanted her daughter to adore royal life and hence, spoiled her rotten. She even had a large room made for her and assigned several changelings to be her personal guards and valets. Whatever Bellatrix requested, it was hers. Chrysalis even allowed her to have a doll and to decorate her room how she wanted. She told Bellatrix how she deserved only the best, for she was special, not just because she was a royal, but for her unusual yet gorgeous purple eyes and green hair (though that wasn't entirely unusual because Chrysalis' mother had had green hair).

Naturally, all those praises and spoils went to Bellatrix's head. Even as a child, whenever she flew about the hive, she would hold her head up proudly and give her hair a show-offish flip. This brought disdain to the other changelings, but they knew they shouldn't complain about the heir to the throne. So instead, they gave her more praises, which only confirmed Bellatrix's belief that she was better than the rest of them.

Things would've stayed that way if she hadn't discovered how much of that was untrue.

At five years old, Bellatrix was ready to begin formal training with her mother. So far the only magic she knew was levitating objects when she needed them, though she preferred watching her valets do it for her. She and her mother went outside for their first lesson.

"Now, Bellatrix," Chrysalis said as she paced in front of her

daughter, "as you know, we changelings are capable of turning into any creature, with some limits, of course."

"Like what?" Bellatrix snorted. "I thought you said I could do anything."

"Well, for instance, we can't change into anything larger than three thousand pounds in weight, like a giraffe or a blue whale. Besides, it would leave a mess, anyway. The easiest thing we can turn into, because we have an equine physique, is a pony."

Chrysalis levitated a picture of three ponies: one with a horn, one with wings and one with neither.

"Here you see three types of ponies: a unicorn, a pegasus and an earth pony. The fourth type, an alicorn, which has a horn and wings, is very rare, and we must only take that form if one alicorn is out of commission. Not very good for simple camouflage, though."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Bellatrix said, waving her hoof, "so when can I start doing the changing stuff?"

Chrysalis shook her head. "Bellatrix, darling, I do admire your ambition so, but you must be patient."

The young princess rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

The queen sighed. "Alright. We'll start with an alicorn, since that is the easiest. You'll just be turning into young creatures for now, but as you get older, you'll learn to take adult forms and even change your sex."

"Huh?"

"Meaning you'll learn how to change into a male."

"Gross!"

The queen shrugged. "Sometimes it's necessary. You never know what your victim might prefer."

Chrysalis then instructed her daughter on the transformation

process. Bellatrix attempted to try it out for herself by closing her eyes and focusing on the form she wanted to take.

"Make sure you have a clear image of what you want," her mother reminded her. "Fur color, mane color, eye color, mane style, everything."

"Okay, I got it," Bellatrix said with a nod.

"Good. Now, imagine yourself taking that form."

Bellatrix tightened her eyes and scrunched her nose as she concentrated. After about a minute, green flames surrounded her. She opened her eyes and looked down at her green hooves.

"Hey!" she squealed. "I did it!"

But when she looked up, she saw her mother with her hoof to her face.

"What?"

Chrysalis summoned a mirror. Bellatrix had succeeded in changing her body, but her mane, wings, horn, tail and eyes had not changed.

"But I was concentrating really heard!" she insisted.

Chrysalis took a deep breath. "No matter. It was your first time. We'll try again. And this time, make sure you're focusing on your *whole* body and not just one part."

They spent the rest of the day trying to get the alicorn disguise right, but no matter how many times Bellatrix tried, there would always be something off. After the third time, she had managed to change her mane and tail, but her wings, horn and eyes still gave her away. Sometimes she'd get the horn right but not the wings, or get the eyes but not the tail. Over and over and over, all day long and she still couldn't get the full disguise.

By sunset, Bellatrix was panting after her thousandth try, her horn being the incriminating body part this time.

"Maybe I can wear a hat?" she asked with a nervous smile.

Chrysalis just scowled and shook her head.

"I'll keep trying, Mother!" the princess insisted. "I'll do better tomorrow!"

But it took a month for Bellatrix to get the disguise right, no matter how late she stayed up practicing. When she finally did it, she had hoped her mother would shout for joy, but she only rolled her eyes, saying that it was about time.

Her training over the next few years became more rigorous. Chrysalis pushed her daughter, hoping that her perseverance would make up for her lack of talent. However, it took even longer for Bellatrix to hide her wings for her unicorn disguise and even longer for her to hide her horn. As her twelfth birthday approached, she could not yet perfect the earth pony transformation. Nevertheless, Bellatrix was determined to please her mother and stayed up until midnight practicing her transformations and even trying to strengthen her levitation skills. Her mother had said that was her strong point, which she added wasn't saying much. Teleportation proved to be even more difficult for Bellatrix. The farthest she could travel was a centimeter, so no one could tell she had even done anything.

Despite how little she had accomplished, it was still tradition for the princess to go on her first hunt the day she turned twelve.

"Start small on your first target," her mother had said. "Perhaps a foal of some sort, or a large crowd where love is always in the air for the taking. Remember to show no mercy, but also be careful."

Bellatrix came across a small town called Hoofington and disguised herself as a unicorn filly, since she found that easier than a pegasus and an alicorn would've raised too much attention. As she walked through the streets, she gazed in awe at her surroundings. She was surprised to see the ponies living in separate houses and to see the children playing strange games involving ropes and tiny metal balls. She considered going over to them to feed, but paused when she saw a group of ponies gathering around a peculiar wagon opened

up to look like a stage.

" *Mares and gentlecolts,* " a male voice echoed, " *colts and fillies, griffons and minotaurs and all those in between* !"

Bellatrix figured a show was going on and, remembering what her mother said about crowds being good feeding grounds, walked up to the stage. She pushed to the head of the crowd to get a good view.

" *Brace yourselves* ," the voice continued, " *for what you are about to see will shock and amaze you! Feast your eyes on the wonderful, amazing magic of Ozcar the Great!* "

In a puff of smoke, a green cloaked figure appeared onstage. All Bellatrix could see of the pony was his blue eyes underneath his green top hat. Then his cape swished open and doves flew out. Bellatrix's eyes widened in wonder at the light brown stallion with the brown beard.

The crowd cheered and the stallion, Ozcar the Great, tipped his hat and bowed, revealing his horn and wavy brown mane.

"Thank you, thank you!" he exclaimed, putting his hat back on. "Now, for my first trick…"

Bellatrix watched in amazement as the unicorn stallion made rabbits and birds appear and disappear, turned water into oil, and made sparkling lights called fireworks spring up behind him. She didn't even pay attention to the crowd's adoration for the magician that was pouring into her.

"And now," Ozcar the Great announced, "I should like a volunteer from the audience."

Many ponies raised their hooves, the foals jumping up and down. Bellatrix, suddenly feeling a little shy, tried to shrink back into the crowd. Ozcar noticed her, however, and pointed to her.

"How about you, little lady?"

Bellatrix straightened up, glanced around and pointed to herself. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Come up and join me!"

She grinned in excitement and raced up the steps.

"Now what's your name, little filly?"

She paused. Should she say her real name?

"B-B-Bellatrix."

"Bellatrix?" Ozcar said, tapping his chin. "Unusual name, but I think it suits you."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Of course. A pretty little filly like you deserves a pretty name."

She couldn't help but blush.

"But wait!" Ozcar gasped.

"What?"

"I think something's wrong with your ear!"

"What?!" she exclaimed, putting her hooves to her ears.

"Let me see," he said, looking closely at her left ear. "Ah, there's the problem! There's something stuck there!"

"What? What is it?"

"Why, it's a…"

He reached behind her ear and Bellatrix gasped at the black and white stick he pulled out.

"A magic wand!"

"I didn't even see your horn glow! How'd you do that?"

He winked. "A magician never reveals his secrets. Here, hold this for a second."

Bellatrix couldn't help but squeal as she took the wand in her hoof. A large tank of water then appeared onstage.

"Now, mares and gentlecolts!" Ozcar announced. "I am going to chain myself with these," he summoned a pile of chains, "and climb into the tank and try to escape before I run out of breath!"

The crowd and Bellatrix gasped in alarm. Ozcar pulled her close.

"Now, Bellatrix, this is very important. When the curtain falls on the tank, I want you to count to ten and then tap this wand on the tank three times and then say the word, 'Abracadabra.' Then I want you to lift the curtain off the tank. Got it?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"Good."

Then he began strapping the chains to himself and climbed into the tank.

"Wish me luck, folks!"

He took a deep breath and submerged as a red curtain suddenly covered the tank. Bellatrix nervously counted to ten, tapped the wand three times and said the magic word. Then her horn glowed as she tugged the curtain off the tank. Every pony gasped to see that only the chains remained. Then Ozcar poofed onstage and the crowd erupted in applause. Bellatrix clapped her hooves together excitedly.

"That was incredible!" she exclaimed. "I've never seen such amazing magic as this!"

Ozcar chuckled. "Well, Bellatrix, any pony can do these things with the right amount of practice, and I couldn't have gotten out of there if it hadn't been for you." He lightly touched her chest. "You've got the magician's gift."

Her eyes flashed slightly at the thought. "You really think so?"

"I have a good feeling about it."

Bellatrix looked down at the wand and handed it to him. He held up his hoof.

"Keep it, kid. A little something to get you started. In fact…"

He took off his hat and turned it inside out, transforming it into a pointed purple hat decorated in yellow and blue stars. Bellatrix bounced excitedly as the hat floated onto her head. Unfortunately, it was so big that it fell over her eyes.

"You'll grow into it," Ozcar said, lifting the brim of her new hat. Then he turned back to the audience. "Let's give a big hoof for Miss Bellatrix here!"

The ponies cheered and Bellatrix could literally feel their love transferring to her, but that wasn't what was making her heart pump. The applause, the praise, the cheers, they made her feel so important, so loved, so…powerful.

As she bowed, her hat fell off and she noticed a piece of paper inside. It was an autographed poster of Ozcar the Great. She smiled up at the magician, who winked at her.

When Bellatrix returned home that evening, Chrysalis was not only surprised to see a magician's hat on her daughter, but a giddy grin.

"Mother, it was amazing!" the princess exclaimed. "There was this magician, and he made all these things appear and disappear, and he made these things called fireworks, and he called me up onstage so I could help him escape this tank of water, and then he gave me this cool hat and wand and…"

"What about your hunt?" the queen interrupted. "Did you drain any ponies of their love?"

Bellatrix blinked. "Oh, right. The hunt. Well, I certainly got a lot of love when the ponies started cheering for me and shouting my name! Oh, Mother! It felt so wonderful to be adored in such a way!"

"But did you get enough to feed?"

"Oh, um…I think so."

Chrysalis' horn glowed as she looked her daughter over. "Well, seems you've had a decent fill, anyway. Not entirely terrible for your first hunt. Next time, however, try something a little less…artificial."

Bellatrix frowned for a second but then brightened up. "Mother, do you think I could do magic stuff like Ozcar the Great?"

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Ozcar the Great!" the princess repeated, showing the poster. "The magician I was telling you about!"

Chrysalis shook her head. "Darling, that's not *real* magic. Magicians can't do any real magic, so they use illusion."

"But don't we use illusion all the time?"

"That's different. Our transformations are real. He cannot truly change things, only make it seem that way."

"But when he pulled that wand out of my ear…"

"A simple slight of hoof. Any pony can do that."

"So that means I can too?"

Chrysalis rolled her eyes. "Bellatrix, if you are going to rule the changelings one day, you must avoid any…silly distractions."

Bellatrix frowned as her mother lifted her hat from her. "What are you doing?"

"A Princess of the Changelings cannot go flying around with a ridiculous…"

"Please, let me keep this stuff, Mother? I'll only wear it when I'm alone!"

"No, you…"

The princess stomped her hoof. "It's not fair! You've always gotten

me what I wanted before!"

The queen groaned. "Fine. Just don't wear that thing in public."

Bellatrix grinned as the hat returned to her. "Thank you."

"But no more of this silly magician stuff! You are only to practice serious magic! Understood?"

The princess grumbled. "Yes, Mother."

But Bellatrix didn't stay true to her word. Whenever she would go out hunting, she would take her chance to see Ozcar the Great or any other magician she would happen to stumble upon. She even swiped a magic kit from a toy store and would practice card tricks and making objects appear when she was alone. She even found a way to fake teleportation, though the puffs of smoke she made confused her mother.

While she got better at these little tricks, her transformations still progressed slowly. She eventually got the hang of the earth pony disguise, but when it came to other species, the best she could do was a donkey or a cow, and those weren't nearly as impressive. Sometimes she'd turn into a white donkey with brown spots, or a cow with long ears.

Yet Bellatrix wasn't giving up on improving her magic. She got her hooves on magic books from libraries and studied complicated spells. Chrysalis didn't object to this, thinking her technique might improve. However, the only magic she seemed to excel in was what her mother called the artificial kind. The queen eventually took notice of this when Bellatrix's puff of smoke diminished before she could duck out of sight. The guards then reported finding a magician's kit in her room.

When Bellatrix was eighteen, her studies had not gone as well as Chrysalis had hoped. She decided it was time to give her daughter a real challenge, so she called her forth. Bellatrix suspected something was wrong when she approached her mother's throne and the entire colony was hovering around her. Nevertheless, she tried to put on a bold face and stood erect before her mother.

"My dear daughter," Chrysalis said, shaking her head. "It has come to my attention that you are rather…behind on your studies."

"I've tried, Mother!" the princess insisted. "I practice every night!"

"Yes, I know." A pack of cards appeared between them. "I know how much you 'practice.'"

"Mother, that's just a hobby and it's actually helped…"

"You're wasting your time with this *magician* nonsense! You really think card tricks and plastic wands are going to get you power?"

"But…"

"Oh, Bellatrix, Bellatrix, Bellatrix," the queen said, shaking her head again. "You must understand. A ruler must be great. A ruler must be powerful."

She hovered over to her daughter and lifted her chin. "Unfortunately, my dear, you are none of those things."

The princess' eyes were watering. "But…I've tried! I'll try harder! I'll do better!"

"Ah, so emotional, so passionate. I actually thought you having a heart wouldn't get in the way of things, for it always seemed set on power. I would've taken it out years ago, but it seems to be the only thing that has kept you going this long."

"I only live to please you! You know that!"

"Yes, I know."

Chrysalis turned around and hovered back to her throne. "I only have one option left for you, Bellatrix. Perhaps it would be better if you were to live on your own for a while."

The princess blinked. "What do you mean?"

The queen sat on her throne and addressed the assembly. "I, Queen Insectra Arachne Chrysalis Changeling III, hereby decree

that Princess Bellatrix Insectra Arachne Changeling shall henceforth be exiled from the changeling hive for five years!"

"WHAT?!" Bellatrix snapped, buzzing up to her mother. "You can't banish me!"

Chrysalis smirked. "My dear, I just did."

"Where will I go?! What will I do?! I'm your *daughter* !"

"If you can learn to fend for yourself out there, then you've proven yourself a true ruler and changeling."

"But you told me what happens to changelings who leave the hive! They don't survive long!"

"Ah, but you're a royal and have a longer life expectancy. Besides, if you're truly clever enough to be Queen, you'll figure it out. Don't think of this as banishment, dear. Think of it as an extended vacation, or a lesson that needs to be learned. I'm giving you an opportunity, not a punishment. If you wish, I can have the guards escort you safely to the nearest town."

Bellatrix huffed. "I will let myself out, thank you!"

She turned around and hovered toward the exit. She turned back to her mother and narrowed her eyes.

"I'll show you! I'll show you all!"

Chrysalis only rolled her eyes as her daughter vanished. "I certainly hope so."

Bellatrix kept her head down as she walked further and further away from the hive and deeper into the forest. She paused for a moment to look back and then closed her eyes as she tried to hold back her tears.

Then she growled in anger.

"After everything I've done to please her, she throws me out like some useless house pet?!"

She trudged on, not caring where she was going as she continued grumbling to herself.

"Eighteen years of enduring her criticisms, practicing day and night, working to become the queen I was born to be, and this is the thanks I get?!"

She started mimicking Chrysalis. "'A ruler must be *great* ! A ruler must be *powerful* !'"

Bellatrix stopped to look at her reflection in a puddle. "I'll show *her* great and powerful!"

As she examined her appearance, she realized that if she was going to be living in the outside world, she would need a new identity. She ran her hoof through her green mane as she thought of what she could do with herself.

"Hmm," she uttered. "I've always liked the color blue, but that doesn't look good with green. Hmm, I could keep the eyes though. That way no pony would question those stupid flashes. I could be an alicorn! Nah, I'd look suspicious. If I become a unicorn, I could still do magic. Now what about my cutie mark? Can't go around with a blank flank. Hmm, what talent could I at least fake?"

Her horn fizzed for a second and she grinned. "Perfect!"

Bellatrix looked back in the water as she changed into her chosen disguise. Her sleek, black body sprouted blue fur, a picture of a wand and a sparkling handkerchief growing on her flank. Her cobweb green hair softened, turning platinum with light blue highlights and gently curling upwards. Her wings and shell vanished and her horn became better formed. The slits in her eyes shaped into round, black pupils.

Once she saw her new reflection, she smiled.

"Ooh, not bad!" she exclaimed, looking at herself from all angles. "Not bad at all!" She ran her hoof through her silky new mane.

"Definitely won't need conditioner." She turned so her flank was visible in the puddle. "Ooh, la, la! The stallions won't be able to resist me!"

She caught sight of her new cutie mark. "Well, I've always admired the great magicians, and every pony will admire *me* once I join them!"

She tapped her chin as a new idea occurred to her. "Of course, every magician needs to look the part!"

She remembered the hat she had left at the hive and used her magic to teleport it to her. She put it on and gazed at her reflection again.

"Perfect!" she chuckled darkly. "Simply perfect! Though I should probably get a cape somewhere."

She lifted her head and glared at the faraway image of the hive.

"Just you wait, Mother," she growled. "I *will* be great! I *will* be powerful! I will be the greatest, most powerful changeling…no! The greatest, most powerful *equine* that has ever lived! All shall bow down to Queen Bellatrix, the Great and Powerful!"

As she said this, she dramatically threw her front hooves into the air and, as a magical reaction, fireworks exploded behind her. But the fireworks suddenly fizzed and extinguished when the changeling's face scrunched in disgust.

"Blech! That doesn't really fit, does it?"

She returned to her hooves and tapped her chin. "Okay, okay. The Great and Powerful Bellatrix? Nah, too many syllables. This body doesn't even look like a 'Bellatrix.' Something short, something snappy… Bella? No, sounds like a dumb vampire, though that would be appropriate, considering. Belle? Nah, too girly. Trix? That sounds like some cheap cereal! Trix *ie* ?"

She paused. "Trixie…"

Her lips curled into an evil grin. "The Great and Powerful Trixie! Huh.

Has a nice ring to it."

She turned back to the hive one last time. Her mother was right about one thing. This banishment wasn't a punishment. It was an opportunity. An opportunity to prove to that she *was* a true changeling.

"You'll be sorry, Mother. You'll be sorry you ever kicked your daughter out!"

She looked at the path ahead of her.

"Princess Bellatrix is gone. Long live the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

On the road to the nearest town, Trixie had the fortune of meeting a zebra selling her wagon. Trixie kept some bits in her hat for such emergencies. On the downside, she had to pull the wagon herself.

She reached Hoofington where she put on her first show, using the tricks she had been developing over the years. She was a success and earned plenty of bits. The first thing she bought was a purple cape. She used her magic to make the pattern match that of her hat.

As time went on, Trixie traveled from town to town, showing off her magic. Sometimes she had to make up stories of her accomplishments to grab ponies' attention. When there wasn't much of an audience, Trixie would hang out with a few groupies. Their adoration was like chili peppers.

If she had kept it up, she would've gained enough power to impress her mother, had it not been for her run-in with Twilight Sparkle. As if humiliating her wasn't enough, Trixie found more reasons to get her revenge on Celestia's prized pupil. Months later, she heard there had been a changeling attack on Canterlot, which enraged Trixie. Her mother had already started her takeover plans without her! True, she failed, but the idea was still insulting!

The straw that broke the camel's back was a news story on Twilight Sparkle's latest victory over Queen Chrysalis. According to the article, Chrysalis had attempted to turn Twilight as dark as her in

order to make the unicorn her pupil. Trixie had not only crushed the paper but zapped it to a crisp.

"Even my own mother thinks Twilight is better than me! Well, I'll show her!"

This was the reason Bellatrix never took a new form to start over. The next time she met Twilight Sparkle, she wanted her to be aware of who she was dealing with. Of course, she couldn't improve her magic overnight. She heard rumors of a powerful necklace called the Alicorn Amulet and spent months searching for it, until she found it in an old antique shop.

Unfortunately, that plan didn't quite work. Yet again, Twilight had outsmarted her. Not long after her defeat, Trixie took time to reflect on her actions. That amulet had made her do things she had never dreamed of doing. She had spent years draining others of their love, but never really hurt any pony.

She hadn't liked it. She hadn't liked it one bit. She was a performer, not a dictator. She wasn't…her mother.

That was why she felt compelled to apologize to Twilight Sparkle. Bellatrix hadn't quite forgiven her yet, which was why she did it as Trixie.

She set out to start anew, to figure things out. That's when she stumbled into Dimondia where the Diamond Dogs, thinking she had the power to summon gems, made her Queen. It was glorious at first and she couldn't wait to inform her mother about her sudden rise to power…until Trixie realized how difficult it was being Queen. The Diamond Dogs wouldn't let her leave and kept expecting her to produce more gems, which she could not do! She was lucky that Rainbow Dash had agreed to get her out of that jam. Something about having some pony at her side made Trixie feel wonderful, and she started pondering on that "friendship" thing Twilight was always talking about. So once she was free from Dimondia, Trixie decided to focus on her magic and helping others, hoping to find the path rewarding.

Five years went by quicker than Trixie had anticipated. When she

crossed out the big red circle on her calendar, she felt… disappointed. Five years ago, she would've been thrilled that her exile was finally over. But now…her heart wasn't in it. In her exile, she'd become a huge success as a magician and was now a household name. She'd also been helping with the police, the homeless, and orphans. Some of those deeds had been for publicity, but she later found the activities rather enjoyable. There was something fulfilling about bringing joy into ponies' lives. The idea of sucking them all dry made her feel…sick.

And yet that's what her mother wanted her to do. Once she was Queen, Bellatrix was expected to take over Equestria, if her mother never succeeded in doing so herself. Bellatrix didn't want to do that. Sure, ponies were her main source of food, but she never took more love than she needed. Besides, after the incident in Dimondia, it was clear Bellatrix wasn't cut out to be a ruler.

So she knew what she needed to do.

Chrysalis smiled when she saw her daughter buzz into the hive.

"Ah, my sweet Bellatrix!" she exclaimed, putting her hoof around her. "You've returned, at last! My, how you've grown!"

Bellatrix frowned as she wriggled out of the queen's grasp. "Mother, we need to talk…"

"Of course, my dear. Now that you're back, it's time we take your training to the next…"

"There's no more need for training, Mother."

Chrysalis blinked but then smirked. "I see. You think you're fully prepared for the throne. Well, my dear, we still need to test your…"

"What Bellatrix means, Mother, is that Bellatrix will not be training here anymore."

The queen arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

The princess placed her hooves firmly on the floor and stood up straight. "Bellatrix wishes to abdicate her position as Princess of the Changelings."

Chrysalis jumped back. "You're not serious, are you?"

"No, Mother. Bellatrix is quite serious."

"Why are you referring to yourself in the third-person? What has the outside world done to you?"

"Helped Bellatrix see clearly, Mother. Before, Bellatrix thought all that mattered in the world was power, but now she sees that there are more important things. Like friendship, love, thinking of others rather than yourself…"

"Who taught you such vulgar language?! What happened to my daughter?! The changeling who would've done anything to get what she wanted?!"

"That Bellatrix doesn't exist anymore. She has changed. Bellatrix is very sorry, Mother, but she can no longer live in this hive after all she has seen."

Chrysalis clenched her jaw and looked about ready to explode. Then she took a deep breath and looked calmly down at her daughter.

"Very well, my dear. Do what you like. Doesn't matter to me. In fact, I already have a replacement. I've just given birth to a prince."

Bellatrix nodded. "You would do that, wouldn't you? As soon as you find a more powerful candidate, you cast your own daughter aside! Bellatrix knows about your offer with Twilight Sparkle, Mother! She knows you wanted her to replace Bellatrix!"

She turned her back to her. "And you wonder why Bellatrix prefers the world out there to here."

And with that, she departed the hive without looking back.

Many years passed, and Trixie found that the size of her audience was declining. She knew this happened to all performers eventually, but didn't know what she'd do if she couldn't perform. She couldn't go back to the hive. That life wasn't for her and she wasn't wanted anyway. What she needed was new material, or to at least shake things up a bit.

While she was walking through Trottingham, pondering on this, she passed by a theatre with a large crowd in front. She caught sight of a poster with a blue minotaur on it that read: "The Incredible Iron Will." She had heard of this minotaur and that he'd been giving motivational speeches for decades and his popularity had yet to fall. Trixie figured it wouldn't hurt asking him for a few pointers and followed the crowd in.

She pushed for the front row, glaring her horn at any pony who tried to push her back. When the lights dimmed and music sounded throughout the auditorium, the adrenaline inside her started pumping. She had forgotten the excitement of sitting in the audience. Fog covered the stage and a spotlight came up. When she saw the brawny figure rise through the smoke, her eyes widened. When the lights came up and laser beams highlighted the minotaur's ripped body, Trixie's heart pounded wildly against her chest.

"Greetings, friends!" he announced. "My name is Iron Will! And today is the first day of your new life! I want you to stomp if…"

Trixie stomped hard before he could finish his sentence. The minotaur glanced down at her briefly and then continued. She didn't even process half of what he was saying. She was too engrossed in his stage presence. His deep voice, his flare, his muscles, the way he spoke in the third-person like she always did…she was hooked with no chance of ever getting back in the ocean.

After the show, she just had to go meet him backstage. However, she was stopped by two security goats before she could knock on his dressing room door.

"Um, excuse me?" she said. "Trixie doesn't have an appointment, but she just has to speak with Mr. Will."

She tried to step around them, but they blocked her path again and brayed.

"Oh, Trixie's not thinking anything naughty!" she insisted, though this was slightly less true. "She just wants to speak with him, showpony to show…uh, minotaur."

The goats brayed again and shook their heads. Trixie scowled and started up her horn.

"Get out of the way, NOW!"

A small dark cloud grew above them and zapped them both with lightning. They shrieked and scattered.

"Thank you," Trixie said, smiling in satisfaction.

She raised her hoof to knock, but the door opened for her. She looked up at the minotaur, who was nodding at her in approval.

"Iron Will saw the whole thing through the keyhole. It was all part of the test. No pony gets to see Iron Will without proving themselves. Come on in, Miss…"

"Trixie," she said as she stepped inside. "The Great and Powerful Trixie, to be exact."

"Uh-huh," he said, noticing her cape. "Magician?"

"Cute *and* smart," she giggled. "Trixie must say, Mr. Will, that was quite a performance."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why you referring to yourself in the third-person?"

She snorted. "You're the one to talk."

That got a chuckle out of him. "So what brings you to Iron Will's assertiveness training seminar? Were you one-hundred percent satisfied?"

Her eyes wandered to his broad chest. "Oh, Trixie's *satisfied* ,

alright, though she didn't come here for any assertiveness training. She's quite capable of speaking for herself."

"Clearly," Iron Will said, looking out at the goats shivering by the door.

"Trixie actually came to get a few pointers from a fellow performer. See, her audience has been…lacking, lately."

"Really?" he said, rubbing his chin in interest. "Well, perhaps the Great and Powerful Trixie and the Incredible Iron Will could discuss this…over lunch?"

Her eyes flashed. "Really? I mean…you sure your…?" She paused to quickly check for his loved ones and frowned when she saw a female minotaur. "Girlfriend or…wife won't mind?"

The minotaur's face fell. "Iron Will has been single since…the Mrs. passed on."

Trixie's heart sank. "Oh, I…I'm sorry, I…"

He held up his hand. "It's okay. Iron Will's had time to get used to it." He smiled slightly. "You still up for lunch?"

Trixie nodded ecstatically.

Lunch was only the beginning. It was followed by four weeks of ecstasy. After they had both done their shows for the day, they would meet for dinner. They exchanged performing techniques, shared their likes and dislikes, and talked about their feelings… something Trixie had never been able to do with anyone. One day, he took her to a carnival where he won her a stuffed pig at a Test-Your-Strength game. She returned the favor by winning him a gorilla at a dart booth.

Before they got off the Ferris wheel, he whispered in her ear, asking that they head back to his place.

When she awoke in his bed the next morning, Trixie had never felt so wonderful. She was alone, as he had gotten up to make them breakfast, which gave her time to ponder over last night's events.

All these years since she left the hive, she'd been searching for something to fill the emptiness in her heart. She'd done more than given herself to someone she'd grown to care about. She'd found closure with someone. True, he wasn't exactly what she'd expected from a significant other, but changelings were never really picky with species.

However, something unpleasant was nagging at her brain. Iron Will had said last night that he was falling in love with her. But he wasn't in love with Bellatrix. He was in love with Trixie. Yes, she was as much Trixie as she was Bellatrix, but there was a whole side of her he didn't know. She felt guilty hiding a big part of her life from him; especially after all he had shared with her.

She cautiously opened the kitchen door and found him whistling joyfully as he flipped pancakes on the stove. She couldn't help but smile and imagine what it would be like to wake up every morning to this display. He turned his head and grinned at her.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," Trixie replied, taking a seat at the table.

"Sleep well?" he asked with a wink.

She nodded and said in a sultry voice, "Oh, yes. One-hundred percent satisfaction guarantee."

He chuckled as he set a plate of pancakes in front of her.

"Iron Will also made some hay smoothies," he said as he poured her a glass from the blender. "He remembers how much you like them."

"They taste like love," she whispered.

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

She levitated the glass to her lips, but then paused and set it back down.

"What's the matter?" Iron Will asked. "Too sweet?"

"Willie?" she said, looking up at him with worried eyes. "Last night's not going to be…the only time, is it?"

He grinned as he propped his elbows on the table. "Not if you want it to be."

"I mean…do you think…you and I…that we…?"

His eyes held a glimmer of hope. "Do you want to?"

"Oh, I do! I do! It's just…" She bit her lip. "Well, last night was…new to me."

His smile disappeared and his face was etched in concern. "It wasn't your first time, was it?"

"No, no, it wasn't my first, but…it was different. I feel…I feel… *close* to you…like I can tell you anything."

Iron Will grinned again as he took her hoof. "Iron… *I* feel the same way."

"I know," she said under her breath.

She knew all too well. She could feel the love radiating from him, and the beating of her heart reciprocated it. Still, she wanted to hear it from his mouth.

"Do you love me, Willie?"

He took a moment to ponder and then nodded. "Yes. We may have known each other a short time, but I believe I do."

"Even though we're…not exactly…the same?"

"Come on, we're very much the same! We're both show-creatures, we live to impress others and we have that strange compulsion to speak in the third-person." He nodded toward the bedroom. "And I think we've already proven that our differences won't get in the way of anything."

Trixie smiled slightly at this sentiment but then frowned again. "What if…what if I didn't look like this?"

He blinked. "If you mean once you get older…"

"No, I mean…" She sighed. "If I wasn't…beautiful…would you… would you still love me?"

"Trix, I like you for you, not how you look."

"Then…promise you won't freak out?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Freak out about what?"

She sighed again as she let go of his hooves. "I haven't been entirely honest with you. Not because I don't trust you, but…I was scared of how you'd react."

He tilted his head in confusion. "Trixie, what are you…?"

"First of all, my name's not Trixie. It's Bellatrix. And this…" She gestured towards her body. "Isn't the real me." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Please don't freak out."

She immediately regretted it the moment she abandoned her disguise. For as soon as she did, Iron Will shrieked and fell out of his chair. Bellatrix opened her eyes in terror and saw him on the floor, giving her an equally frightened gaze.

"Y-y-you're a…a…"

"I know this looks bad," she started to say, "but if you let me explain…"

"Changeling!" he shouted, crawling backward.

"Yes, I'm a changeling," she gently said as she held her deformed hoof out to him, "but that doesn't mean I don't…"

"Get away from me!"

"Willie, it's me!" she insisted, changing back to Trixie. "See?"

"You tricked me! You've been feeding on me this whole time!"

"Willie, no, I would never…!"

He grabbed his chair and held it in front of him. "Back off!"

Tears filled her eyes. "Willie, please…!"

"Don't come any closer! You're not getting a piece of Iron Will!"

"Willie, if you'll just listen to me…!"

"Get out!"

"WILLIE, I LOVE YOU!"

"GET OUT!"

Trixie rushed out the door and picked up her cape and hat. She wept as she ran through the streets. The pain in her heart was too much to bear. She had willingly given herself to him, shown him her full trust.

And she had scared him away.

Her first instinct was to take her wagon and leave town. She wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

And yet, as the weeks went by, she found she couldn't get over it. It became harder for her to perform, for the thought of Iron Will standing in the audience would always come. She could not even drink hay smoothies or eat pancakes anymore, as they reminded her of that awful day.

After a month had passed, her heart still hadn't healed, and the thought of the creature that had broken it made her queasy. She didn't think time was going to heal this wound.

Then she remembered something her mother had told her. When the queen's heart was broken by the creature she adored, she had found a remedy. Trixie shivered at the thought. She didn't want to ask her mother for help and the idea sounded painful, but it couldn't

be more painful than what she was going through now.

So she returned to the hive for the first time in over a decade. Chrysalis was surprised to see her, but greeted her warmly.

"Well, well, well. My dear, dear Bellatrix. So good to see you again, my dear."

"Let's cut to the chase, Mother," the former princess said bluntly. "You've told me numerous times what you did to mend your broken heart and…well…I want you to do the same to me."

Chrysalis' eyebrows shot up. She had not expected this, but the thought made her grin mischievously.

"Let me guess. Some male has broken your heart, hasn't he?" She smirked. "Or was it perchance a female?"

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "Just do it."

The queen shrugged. "Alright, keep your secrets. Well, my sweet daughter, I'll comply with your request. However, I must warn you of the possible side effects. See, while this will devoid you of most of your emotions, it will not take all of them. Emotions come from other areas of your body, like the brain…"

"Yes, yes, whatever! Just get on with it!"

"Alright. But there's one thing you must remember." Chrysalis looked seriously, almost sympathetically, at her daughter. "You'll feel liberated at first, but soon you'll find yourself with an emptiness that can never be filled." She said the rest in a low voice. "And once you've had a taste of this emptiness…you can never go back."

Bellatrix shook her head as tears developed in her eyes. "I don't care. I just want to stop hurting."

Chrysalis sighed. "That's exactly what I said."

She raised her hoof to do the deed. Bellatrix closed her eyes and braced herself. She cried out as she felt her mother's hoof plunge into her chest and squeeze around her insides. And then suddenly…

she felt nothing. She opened her eyes to see a glowing, green heart pounding in the queen's hoof.

"How do you feel?"

Bellatrix patted her chest, making sure there wasn't a hole in it. She looked about herself and then up at her mother.

"Free," she uttered. "I…I'm not hurting anymore, but…it's a bit strange."

The queen smirked. "You'll get used to it, my dear. You'll see how much easier it is to live without emotions getting in the way of things. Perhaps now that you are more like the rest of us, you'll consider rejoining us?"

Bellatrix's face fell. Suddenly, her brain was working at a pace faster than ever before, and she saw things clearer than ever before. She had been hesitant to rejoin the changelings before, but she was certain of it now.

She stood defiantly before the queen. "You don't need me here, Mother. You've got my brother to take over for you. And you were right. I'm unfit to be a ruler. I've had my taste of power, and blew it. So I doubt this is a real loss for you. Keep my heart. Lock it away where no one, not even I, will find it. Today is the last day you'll see me, Mother. I am done with the hive."

She could not read the expression on her mother's face. After a moment of silence, the queen bowed her head.

"If that is your desire, I wish you the best of luck, Bellatrix."

And so, Bellatrix turned her back on the hive for the final time.

Trixie was dedicated to her career more than ever. Now that her destiny was clear, she had nothing else to live for.

However, it didn't take long for her to realize the side effects her mother had been talking about. Without her heart, she didn't feel as

passionate as she used to about performing. Her head told her it was all she had in life, but her heart was literally not in it. Because of this, the emptiness her mother had warned about slowly grew inside her. After a month of heartlessness, Trixie was beginning to think there was no point in living anymore.

Then she felt it. The squirming inside her, like there was a worm trying to wriggle out of her belly. Her mother had explained these symptoms, and that after feeling them multiple times, one got used to it. But Trixie didn't think it would happen without the royal blessing. Part of that spell was meant to kick-start a royal changeling's reproductive organs, so she could have multiple births each month. Her mother also said one would feel queasy during the first few pregnancies, but those would eventually go away. But could she? Without the royal blessing?

There was only one way to really be sure.

Trixie looked in a mirror and tried the love-seeing spell on herself. Nothing showed up for her, but a picture of herself appeared on her stomach.

That's how she knew she had a new life growing inside her. She couldn't reproduce asexually yet, which meant she was carrying the child of the minotaur who had broken her heart.

When the baby arrived, Trixie made sure she was in complete solitude in her wagon. She didn't know how the baby was going to turn out and couldn't risk startling a doctor. It was a pain going into labor alone, but luckily, the little black larva seemed to slip right out.

As Trixie held up the larva, she frowned. She felt no joy over seeing her daughter. Even when the little thing opened her slit yellow eyes, she felt nothing. She didn't even cry.

It was disappointing.

Then she noticed something odd about the larva. It had a small gray horn growing out of its forehead. The yellow eyes also reminded her

greatly of the father. Anger welled up inside her, one of the few emotions that seemed to stay. Her heart was gone, yet this child was here to take its place as a reminder of her heartbreak. For a moment, she considered getting rid of it.

Then the larva sneezed and was encased in green flames. Trixie yelped as she was now holding a blue unicorn foal with black cloven hooves, a cow-like tail and a curl of highlighted blue hair. The child sneezed again and turned back into a larva.

"Goodness!" Trixie exclaimed. "You're certainly going to have a hard time with the world."

The baby responded by sneezing back into a foal. Then she started crying. Trixie tried to shush her as she cradled her. It took a few minutes for the filly to fall asleep, a small smile on her face. Trixie couldn't help but smile a bit too.

"You're a strange one," she said. "You're going to need someone to help you hide these oddities, so you won't be ostracized like your mother was."

Trixie still felt no pleasure in holding her newborn, but she did feel a sense of responsibility. She was all this unusual child had and no one was going to protect her but her mother. As a moonbeam shone on the child's peaceful face, Trixie realized that her life wasn't so empty anymore. She had a new purpose. She vowed that no matter what, she was going to bring happiness to this little filly, even if that happiness could never be reciprocated.

Still, she found herself wishing every day for the next nine years that just for a moment, she could feel love for her daughter.

See why this took a while?

Yes, some of you guessed it was Iron Will. Sorry, it's my crack ship. What made you guys think Moonbeam's father was a griffon or draconequus?

I can't believe you guys didn't get the Ozcar the Great thing,

which is a reference to *Oz, the Great and Powerful* .

Backstories are tough. I didn't bother going into too much detail with stuff in the show and comics, since most of you already know what happened. But man! Sometimes I didn't know when to call her Trixie or Bellatrix!

Sleepless Night

Now that exams are over and I've moved out of my dorm, I can return to this. Before you ask, yes, I have read the Chrysalis origin comic, and it will not affect this story too greatly, though I might make some references to it.

It was apparent that no pony was going to get much sleep that night.

When Trixie woke from her dreams, only a few hours had passed. She glanced down at her daughter, who must have sneezed in her sleep, for she was in her changeling form. And yet, her gray horn still stuck out of her head.

Always there to mock me , Trixie thought with a snort.

Even to this day, she still wondered why she kept Moonbeam if all she did was remind her of the father that helped create her. Maybe Trixie did it to fill the hole in her chest, or to prove herself a better mother than Chrysalis. After all, if she took care of Moonbeam instead of pressuring her into the hard life of a royal, her daughter's life wouldn't be as miserable as hers. Right?

On the other hoof, Moonbeam was all the comfort Trixie had in the world. With her audience diminishing, Moonbeam was the only one who truly loved her for her. She was the one thread of innocence and goodness Trixie could hold onto. She even made her smile sometimes. Happiness was not completely impossible in her heartless state, but no matter how much joy Moonbeam tried to bring her, there would always be that empty space inside.

Oh, how Trixie wished that for just one second, she could feel something other than superficial security for her daughter.

Trixie lay awake for hours just staring at the filly, her eyes squinting, as if that would conjure emotion. After a while, she groaned in frustration.

"Why you gotta do this to Trixie?" she whispered harshly. "It's like that stupid cake metaphor, only it's not like I really have you either!"

Moonbeam stirred in bed and Trixie decided she should vent her anger outside. She slowly lifted her foreleg out from under her daughter and crept out of bed.

"Mom?"

Trixie turned at the soft moan. Moonbeam was rubbing her eyes as she woke.

"Where you going?"

"Go back to sleep, sweetie," Trixie said, stroking her daughter's head. "Mummy's just getting some air."

Moonbeam opened her eyes halfway. "I'm hungry."

"Okay then. We have some peppers left, otherwise there's…"

"No, I'm not… *that* kind of hungry."

Trixie blinked. "Oh. Well, Mummy didn't get much today, but I'll give you what I can."

She sat on the edge of the bed and took Moonbeam in her hooves. Trixie rubbed her cheek against the top of her daughter's head as she transferred what little love she had collected today into her. Heartless changelings couldn't feel love, but they could still share their food with others.

" *Hush little changeling, don't say a word,* " Trixie sang softly. " *Mummy's gonna feed you a mockingbird…* "

"That song's pretty gross," Moonbeam murmured. "Who'd wanna eat a mockingbird?"

"Sorry. You know Mummy doesn't know many songs."

"Sing that one you wrote."

"Sweetie, that's hardly a lullaby."

"I like it. It's catchy."

Trixie sighed but couldn't help but smile at the compliment. Then she sang in an upbeat tune:

" *You better believe*

I got tricks up my sleeve

And I captivate

' *Cuz I'm powerful and great* …"

Moonbeam laughed as her mother started tickling her tummy in the middle of the song. Trixie always adored it when the little filly laughed. She suddenly sneezed and changed into her pony form, which made her laugh even harder.

" *You better believe*

I got tricks up my sleeve

See me dominate …"

"' *Cuz I'm powerful and greeaaat* !" Moonbeam finished with her.

They giggled and Moonbeam threw her hooves around her mother. "I love you, Mom."

Trixie frowned slightly but quickly hid it as she patted her daughter's head. "Yeah. Mummy…loves you…too."

Her ears drooped at the fallacy in that statement. She quickly shook it off.

"But she won't love you anymore if you don't get to sleep."

Moonbeam rolled her eyes as Trixie tucked her back into bed. "Goodnight, then. Again."

Trixie kissed her forehead. "Mummy's just going to step out for a

minute, but she'll be right back. Stay in bed."

The filly yawned as she shut her eyes. "Okay, Mom."

Trixie rose from the bed and levitated her cape onto her body. Then she stepped out and momentarily sprouted wings so she could flutter onto the wagon's roof. She sat there and looked up at the starry sky.

"Lovely night, isn't it?"

She gasped and looked to her right to see Mothball hovering next to her. Trixie narrowed her eyes.

"Trixie thought she made it clear that the Great and Powerful Trixie did not want to be bothered," she said coldly. "And what are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Couldn't sleep," he replied as he sat beside her.

"How come?"

"The love of my life just dumped me. Why are *you* out here?"

"Bellatrix was just told she's next in line for the throne. You do the math."

"Well, you might not have to worry about that anymore."

"Oh?"

Mothball gazed up at the sky. "I've decided to take the throne instead."

"Why? Because your girlfriend dumped you?"

"It's not like I have any other choice. I *live* with her. Even if we end up being friends again, it's just gonna be awkward. Besides, someone's gotta take the throne."

Trixie glanced down at her hooves. "Look, Bellatrix is not the best at advice, but she can tell you this." She looked him in the eye. "Don't

make the same mistake as everyone else in our family."

Mothball blinked. "Huh?"

"Think about it. When the love of Mother's life didn't love her back, she ripped her own heart out. When the love of Bellatrix's life rejected her, she did the same. Now, you might not be ripping your heart out, but in a way, you're doing exactly what your mother and sister did."

"What's that?"

She lowered her head. "Giving up on love."

He turned away. "What else can I do? I tried talking to her, but she won't listen."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "You really are dense, little brother. If love were easy, do you think it would be so powerful?"

"And what about you? What exactly happened between you and your love?"

Her face fell. "Let's just say he wouldn't accept Bellatrix for who she was."

Mothball looked down at his hooves. "That sounds kind of like my problem."

"But Bellatrix gave up too easily, and didn't realize it until it was too late."

His head shot up. "But it's not too late, is it?"

"What?"

"I mean for me and Screwy. I don't have to make the decision right away. We still have time to talk it through." He turned to her. "And you…"

She held up a hoof. "For the billionth time, Bellatrix is not…"

"I'm not talking about the throne. I mean you still have time to make things better with your daughter."

She cocked her head. "What do you mean by that?"

He chuckled slightly. "You're gonna hate me for this, but in the short time I've known you, Trixie, I find that you remind me a lot of our mother."

She gasped. "How dare you?!"

"You said so yourself. You made the same mistake she did, in more ways than one, I think. I don't know what your situation was like with Mother, but when I lived with her, she rarely let me pursue my own desires. Sometimes I felt like a prisoner in that hive. She would lock me away physically and emotionally, preventing me from being myself." His face was serious now. "Isn't that what you're doing to Moonbeam?"

Her eyes widened. "How dare you accuse Trixie of…? I'm not…I would never…"

"You never let her have friends and you never let her show her real self. And what's worse, you keep lying to her about who she is, how you care about her when you really don't." He lowered his head. "Just like Mom always did to me."

"I'm not my mother," Trixie growled.

He looked at her sincerely. "You sure?"

She opened her mouth and paused. Then she shook her head.

"It's different. I may not have a heart, but I actually care about Moonbeam's wellbeing."

"How does that work?"

"Mother tried to tell me that the heart doesn't produce all emotions. They also come from the brain or something like that. I can feel some things, like anger and sadness." The rest she said in a murmur. "Just not enough to cry."

Mothball spoke gently, "But you can't…love?"

She sighed. "Not fully. I don't know." She buried her face in her hooves. "It's complicated."

He waited for her to cry, but all she did was sit still and hide her face. He was beginning to see what she meant when she said most but not all of her emotions were gone. However much she was feeling, Mothball had the urge to cheer her up.

"Do you think…Mother might care for us a little too?"

She looked up at him. "Don't be ridiculous. All Mother ever cared about was power, so she could get revenge on everyone who wronged her."

"Now where have I heard that before?" he smirked at her.

She smiled back and playfully punched him in the shoulder.

"Think about it though," he continued. "Did you know she preserved both our bedrooms?"

She tilted her head. "Really?"

"Yeah. That's how we found the brush we used for the locater spell. Oh, I forgot!"

His horn illuminated and something floated out of the brown tent. Trixie's eyes widened when the object landed in her hooves.

"Smarty Pants?" she whispered. " *My* Smarty Pants?"

He shrugged. "Guess Mother really missed you."

Trixie said nothing. After a few minutes of silence, Mothball rose.

"I don't care if you accept the throne or not, but Moonbeam deserves to know where she came from, and it's not fair to keep lying to her."

Before he departed, he gave her one last look over the shoulder and said, "Be different from Mother."

Then he buzzed off the roof and back into his tent, leaving Trixie to her thoughts.

In the Castle of Chaos, Discord was also lying awake in bed, staring up at the canopy. Apparently, the mare beside him wasn't getting any sleep either.

"You still awake?" Fluttershy whispered.

Discord nodded. She threw her hoof across his neck.

"What's on your mind? Screwball? Chrysalis?"

"A little bit of both," he admitted.

Fluttershy nodded in understanding. "It's been quite a day."

"What if they don't find the princess? What will happen to Mothball and Screwy?"

"I'm sure they can work something out. Love always finds a way."

He turned to her. "Have you *met* our family?"

There was a buzzing sound. Discord rolled over to his dresser. The sound was coming from a handheld mirror.

"Who can be calling at this hour?" he groaned as he held the mirror up. "Answer."

His reflection was replaced with an image of Screwball's face, which was streaked with tears.

"Screwy?" Discord said in alarm.

"Daddy?" she sniffed. "I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier…"

"Oh, that? Forget it, dear. It was just a little spat. But why call so late in the…?"

"I can't sleep. I really need to talk to you."

Fluttershy leaned closer so she could see her daughter. "We're right here, sweetie. What's wrong?"

"I've done something bad. Something really, really bad."

"You didn't kill any pony, did you?" Discord asked with a small chuckle.

"Don't joke with me, Dad! This is serious!"

The draconequus frowned. "Sorry. Go on. Tell us what happened."

Screwball took a deep breath. "First off, we found the princess. You won't believe who she turned out to be."

"You mean it's someone we know?" Fluttershy asked.

"Mom, you remember that show-off unicorn with the alicorn amulet?"

"Trixie?!"

"Well, ain't Fate just dandy?" Discord snorted.

"It gets better," Screwball heaved. "She has a kid."

"Oh my," Fluttershy whispered. "Does she have a husband too?"

"No, and she won't talk about the father. Anyway, she said she didn't want the throne."

Discord slapped his forehead. "I was afraid of this."

"Then Mothy said he should take the throne and then we got into a fight and…" She hung her head. "Oh, this is just awful…"

"What happened?" Fluttershy asked.

Screwball gulped. "I…I threw my ring at him."

"YOU DID *WHAT* ?!" Discord shouted.

On the other end, his daughter jumped back. "I know, I shouldn't have, but…in order for us to stay together, I would have to become

a changeling and I didn't want that and he said I didn't love him as much and…oh, Mommy, Daddy, I think he's right."

As she sobbed, Fluttershy and Discord glanced at each other, communicating with their eyes. Then Discord looked back at his daughter in the mirror.

"So let me get this straight. If you marry Mothball while he's King of the Changelings, you would have to become a changeling?"

"Uh-huh," she sniffed. "To have lots of changeling babies and stuff."

"But you wouldn't have to change your heart, or your personality, right?"

"I don't think so."

Discord sighed. "Honey, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm siding with the boy on this."

Screwball's head shot up. "What? But…you've always hated Mothball!"

"Well," he shrugged, "I can't say I'm particularly fond of the boy, but I don't necessarily *hate* him. I just gave him a hard time so he wouldn't think of leaving you, but it seems you did a fine job of messing up your relationship all on your own."

"But…"

"Sometimes," Fluttershy interrupted, "ponies have to change for the ones they love."

"Yeah," Discord agreed. "Take your mother and me, for example. I gave up Equestria for her."

"And I gave up my mortality for him."

"Yeah, Aunt Twilight mentioned that," Screwball murmured. "But… won't you guys find it weird if I change into an entirely new species?"

"I'll admit," Discord replied, "having a changeling for a daughter will

take some getting used to, but it's not like everything on the inside will have changed. Besides, it will make metamorphic spells so much easier for you."

"And we'll love you no matter what," Fluttershy assured her, "and so will Mothball."

Screwball hung her head again. "I'm not so sure he'll take me back though."

"Sure, he will," Discord insisted. "In fact, your reaction was pretty low-key compared to all the times I lost my temper. Heck, I took over Equestria three…excuse me, four times all because of trivial misunderstandings. One time, I actually…" His face fell as he turned to Fluttershy. "…hurt your mother and nearly lost her forever."

His wife smiled and nuzzled his neck. "I think you inherited a bit of your father's temperament, Screwy."

Discord snorted. "At least you didn't take over Equestria."

"But you still have time to patch things up between you and Mothball."

"Who knows? He might want to do the same but is just afraid that you don't."

"I'll think about it," Screwball said softly. "Hey, you said you took over Equestria all those times because of misunderstandings. Does that include the first time?"

Discord bit his lip. "That…is a story for another night."

Miles away, yet another soul had trouble sleeping.

General Mantis slowly opened the door to the queen's chamber. She was lying still in her bed, just as he had left her. He carefully closed the door behind him and crept to her side.

"I thought I told you to leave me in peace."

He stopped in his tracks. "I…thought you were asleep, my queen."

Her eyelids slowly rose as if they were heavy shades. "Why have you come?"

He pulled up a stool and sat down. "I thought you could use some company in your…last hours. I also wanted to see if you were still…"

He could not go on. Chrysalis rolled her head over to him.

"I'm not dying tonight," she said in a raspy, but clear voice. "No, not tonight. I still have some strength left. You had no reason to disobey my orders."

"I know," Mantis said, hanging his head in shame.

"Tell me, Mantis. Why is it that whenever I bid the others to leave, you insist on staying?"

He raised his eyes to hers. "When you were crowned, I made an oath to serve at your side until the very end."

She smiled slightly. "I've always admired your loyalty, Mantis. Maybe that's why I made you General."

Then she frowned. "Your loyalty is unreasonable, however. For over a thousand years, I've had one goal. Now here I am, on my deathbed, and that goal is unfulfilled."

"You still lived a full life, my queen," the general insisted.

She looked at him wearily. "Have I?"

He hesitated. "Well…surely you have *some* good memories. What about your coronation day?"

"Ah, yes. I remember." She gazed up at the ceiling. "One of the most painful days of my life."

Little did she realize that miles away, a certain draconequus was recalling that same day.

It had been an accident. Discord had not meant to turn the roads into soap. He had simply thought dirt roads were too dirty for a city like Canterlot and could use a good scrubbing. That thought turned into a spell. Earth ponies and unicorns were slipping and sliding all around him. He couldn't help but chuckle a bit at the absurdity of it all.

"You did this!" a unicorn mare shouted.

He held up his paw and claw. "I didn't mean to!"

"Sure, you didn't!" an earth pony said sarcastically.

"This isn't the first prank you've pulled!" the unicorn continued. "Yesterday, you turned our huts upside-down and made the vegetables in the market come alive!"

"Accidents!" Discord insisted. "Though you had to admit those walking vegetables were quite funny."

"You made it rain chocolate milk at the parade last month!" a pegasus cried.

"That was… Oh no, wait. That was actually on purpose."

"See?" the unicorn said. "You're nothing but a freak!"

Discord flinched as the word cut him like a knife. "What did you call me?"

"You heard me! Freak!"

"Why don't you go back to where you came from, freak?!" the pegasus demanded.

"Yeah, freak!" the earth pony shouted. "Take a hike and leave us ponies alone!"

Discord's eyes narrowed and lightning struck in the sky. The ponies realized their mistake too late as the draconequus raised his claw.

"You know something? I really don't like being called *freak* !"

He snapped his fingers and the pegasus' wings detached from her body. She collapsed to the ground and the wings flapped away. At the same time, the unicorn's horn fell off like a broken stick, and the earth pony found himself limbless!

"Who's the freak now, huh?" Discord laughed.

"Discord!"

He stiffened at the voice. He turned around to see the tall, white alicorn with flowing pink hair glaring at him angrily.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"What, this?" Discord said with a nervous grin. "This…this was all an accident…"

Celestia stepped forward. "There seems to have been a lot of those lately."

He gulped. "Well, this magic is so much to control and…"

"Save your excuses, Discord! I will not tolerate this madness!"

"It's not madness! Really, the soap was just a mistake!"

"The only 'mistake' I see here is *you* !"

Discord blinked. "What?"

Celestia's eyes narrowed further. "I should've known I couldn't trust you! Monsters like you can never control themselves! I thought you could be helpful, but you're nothing but a menace!"

He clutched his chest as his heart cracked. It was one thing hearing such words from others, but from a friend?

"I…I thought we were…"

"Friends?" Celestia finished. "You're no friend of mine, Discord."

His eyes went glassy and he looked like he was about to cry. Instead, he scowled and gritted his teeth.

"So be it, then!" he shouted.

Lightning struck again and the sky swarmed with dark pink clouds. Discord growled as he slowly rose above Canterlot.

"Know this, Princess!" he bellowed. "From this day forth, we are at war! You thought I was a menace before? Oh, you ain't seen nothing yet!"

Then he vanished in a grand explosion. Celestia gazed up sadly at where he used to be, regretting what she had done. The alicorn took to the skies and flew as far away from Canterlot as possible.

Once the city was out of sight, she changed into Princess Chrysalis.

"I'm sorry, Dissy," she whispered, a tear falling from her eye, "but it had to be done."

He had to suffer for what he did to her. And yet, for some reason, she wasn't feeling happy about it. Instead, she felt…awful. Why? Wasn't revenge supposed to be sweet?

Maybe she just hadn't fully achieved it yet. Yes, once the changelings took Equestria from him, revenge would be hers. But there would be time for that later.

When she returned to the hive, most of the colony was buzzing near the queen's chamber.

"What's going on?" she asked one of the changelings.

"It's the queen!" the changeling exclaimed. "She's very ill!"

Chrysalis gasped and rushed into her mother's chamber. The sight was too alarming for her to bear. Her mother was lying motionless in her bed, her black skin paler than it had ever been. Many changelings, soldiers especially, were circled around her. Chrysalis was immediately at her side.

"Mother?"

"Chrissy?" Arachne wheezed, turning to face her. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Mother," Chrysalis replied, taking her hoof. "I'm here."

"Have you completed your task?"

The princess nodded. "Yes, Mother. He's rampaging through Equestria as we speak."

The queen grinned. "Good. Then you'll have to carry out the rest of the plan without me."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't given birth in three months. When a queen loses her fertility, she's no good anymore."

Chrysalis' eyes widened. "You don't mean…? No, no! You can't!"

"It happens to every queen. But don't be so sad, my dearest. My end means your beginning. You must lead the troops into Equestria."

"But…I'm not ready."

"You are. Just remember the plan. Wait a while. Replenish the army with new forces. Gain power in whatever way you can. When the time comes, go to the creature, persuade him to join you. If he refuses, drain his power from him and Equestria will be yours. Can you do that for me, Chrissy?"

Chrysalis was silent for a moment and then nodded.

"Now," her mother coughed, "I don't have much time left. I must give you the Royal Blessing before I go. Hold still."

She leaned forward and touched her horn to her daughter's. The queen's horn glowed and a spark was sent from hers to Chrysalis'. The princess shrieked on reflex. Arachne's horn diminished and she lay back down.

"It's done," she breathed. "Chrysalis, come closer. Hear my last piece of advice."

The princess leaned forward and her mother whispered in her ear:

"Don't stop until everything is yours."

And with that, Queen Arachne released her final breath. The changelings, Chrysalis included, bowed their heads in respect. The soldiers took off their helmets, all but one. A youngling in bright green armor approached the bed and gently removed the crown from the queen's lifeless head. He looked up at Chrysalis with his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry about your mother, your highness," he said gently, "but we must…"

The princess nodded. "I know."

The soldiers placed their helmets back on and illuminated their horns, lifting the queen from her bed. Once the funeral procession was over, the changelings gathered around the throne, making a clear path for the princess.

Chrysalis looked hesitantly at the throne. It didn't feel like it was hers. This morning, it was her mother's, and it still seemed like it. She felt like a usurper, and didn't think she was ready to bear this burden.

Then something tapped her leg and she glanced down at the young soldier who was still carrying her mother's crown. He gestured to the crowd.

"They're waiting for you, your majesty."

Chrysalis gazed at the changelings who were watching her in anticipation. They were all her brothers and sisters, and now that their mother was gone, they were in need of a leader, someone to look after them.

And she was the only one who could do it.

Chrysalis held her head proudly as she flew to the throne. The changelings bowed as she passed. Once she reached the throne, she turned around and the changelings raised their heads to watch. The young soldier hovered in front of her as he held out the crown and bowed his head.

"Your majesty."

Chrysalis lowered her head and allowed the youngling to place the crown on her.

"Long live Queen Insectra Arachne Chrysalis Changeling III!" the general announced.

The hive erupted in a cheerful applause. The soldier hovering in front of her looked up at her shyly.

"I'm sure you'll be a magnificent queen, your majesty," he said.

"What is your name, young one?" Chrysalis asked.

The soldier saluted. "Private Mantis, at your service, your majesty."

She smiled and patted his head. "I'll keep an eye on you, Mantis."

Lyrics for "Tricks Up My Sleeve" belong to Daniel Ingram.

Originally, General Mantis was to play a minor role in this story. His character was based on the changeling in dark blue armor that appeared in the comics. But the more I wrote about him, the more I liked the idea of a deeper relationship between him and Chrysalis. I made a slight edit in Chapter 2 so that he has been her general for a thousand years instead of thirty.

I warned you this would be slow-paced, but don't worry, things will be moving along in the next few chapters.

A New Quest

Short chapter, but important.

When the rooster crowed at dawn, Mothball was in bad shape. His eyelids were droopy, his mane was more tangled and dusty than usual, and his chest was tight inside. He could not get a wink of sleep last night, and yet he refused to stay in bed.

He rose from the ground and rubbed his eyes. Today he would have to go back to the hive and receive the Royal Blessing. He doubted Trixie had changed her mind, as she seemed every bit as stubborn as their mother. The only loose end that remained was Screwball.

"Well," he sighed as he lifted the flap of the tent, "time to face the music."

When he poked his head out, he was shocked to see Screwball coming out of her tent at the same time. She froze when they locked gaze. Her mane was also in a tangle, and purple bags were developing under her eyes.

For a long while, they just stared at each other, contemplating who should make the first move. Eventually, Screwball fully emerged from the tent and Mothball followed her example. He slowly walked towards her. She looked down at her hooves, embarrassed to face him.

"Hey," she murmured.

"Hi," he softly replied.

There was silence again.

"Look," he began. "I'm sorry I said those things yesterday."

"No," Screwball said, shaking her head. "You were right."

"No, I wasn't."

"But Mothy, you've done so much for me while I haven't…"

"Yeah, you have. You were my friend when no one else would be. You gave me a home when I needed one. You've even saved my life a few times. I know what I asked from you was a lot, but if I don't become King…"

"I'll do it."

He blinked. "What?"

She lifted her head. "I've been such a brat through this whole ordeal. When you heard your mother was going to die and you had to take the throne, I should've been more supportive. I thought we were on the same page, but I never let you voice your opinion on the situation. If you want to be King, then I'm okay with that."

She sighed. "When I said I would be your friend, I knew the road was gonna be bumpy, but I didn't care. You were interesting, and an outcast like me. I was willing to take any risk just to be with you. I guess I really didn't know what I was getting into, but if changing my species means getting to be with you…I'd do it."

She hung her head again. "You don't have to take me back if you don't want to…"

"Who says I didn't want you back?"

She looked up at him. "Huh?"

Mothball smiled as he took her hoof. "Screwy, I made a promise to love and cherish you, no matter how crazy you get sometimes. And you know very well, even if you wouldn't take me back, I couldn't bear having someone other than you as my queen."

She returned his smile and flung her hooves around him. "And I'd happily be your queen, if you're willing to put up with me."

He chuckled. "Always."

Then he pulled away as something occurred to him. His horn illuminated and the amethyst ring floated out of the brown tent. He held it up in front of her.

"You know," he smirked, "I never did get to finish my speech."

"Finish it then," Screwball said, pushing him down to one knee. "I won't interrupt you this time."

Mothball laughed and took a deep breath. "Screwy," he said, taking her hoof, "the day I met you was the happiest day of my life. When I first saw you on that lake, playing in that pirate ship, I couldn't help but think: that's the strangest creature I've ever seen, and yet, the most beautiful too. I felt my heartbeat when I thought I didn't have one.

"You were the pony who showed me how to have fun, the one who saw the good in me even when I didn't. I always thought I was a heartless creature, but you showed me otherwise. As if that wasn't enough, by taking me into your home, you've given me the family I've always wanted.

"Now, I'm going to need you to be a part of *my* family, which is a lot to ask, but I know that if we put our heads together, we can make things better for the changelings. You should know that I'll love you no matter what form you take, just as long as your beautiful heart doesn't change.

"So…will you marry me and be my queen?"

There were tears in Screwball's eyes as she nodded. He slid the ring on her hoof and she sighed as she gazed at it.

"I was really starting to miss this thing."

Mothball smiled. "So…I guess we're going back to the hive now, huh?"

She gave him a serious look. "Will it hurt? The spell, I mean."

He shrugged. "I don't know. I've never cast it before."

"How do you think I'd look as a changeling?"

He smirked. "As long as you get to keep those eyes, who cares?"

"Well, if you think about it, with me being able to change and all, I could still look like myself."

He caressed her cheek. "You'll always be beautiful to me."

Screwball grinned. "Maybe being a changeling won't be so bad."

"You might not have to find out."

They turned to the wagon where Trixie was standing on the steps. Her eyes were filled with determination.

"I've made my decision," she declared. "I'm accepting the throne."

Screwball and Mothball glanced at each other and then at Trixie.

"You sure?" the latter asked.

She nodded. "I'm sure."

The young couple looked back at each other. Screwball shrugged.

"Well, I guess that makes things easier."

"On one condition," Trixie added.

They cocked their heads at her and said, "Condition?"

She stepped towards them as she replied, "You must get me my heart back."

"Excuse me?" Screwball said.

A yawn came from the pink tent. Twilight emerged looking just as frazzled as the rest of them.

"Morning, every pony," she groaned as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. "What's going on?"

"Trixie says she's going to take the throne," Mothball replied.

The alicorn's head shot up. "What? Really?"

"Only if you get my heart back," Trixie reminded them.

"Okay," Screwball nodded. "Your mom took it, right? So we just go over and demand her to give it back. Simple."

"Not as simple as you think. I told Mother to hide my heart far away where no pony, not even I, could get to it. And knowing Mother, she wouldn't just lock it away somewhere in the hive. She'd also put up high security so no one could get to her heart, especially her enemies who could use it against her."

"We can still ask where she hid it."

Trixie scowled at the ground. "I doubt she'd tell me."

"Well, if you don't want to ask Mother, how do we find it?" Mothball asked.

Twilight tapped her chin and then gasped. "The brush!"

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

The alicorn brought the green brush into view. "The brush we used to find you! At one point, it was telling us to go in two different directions. I thought it was just recalibrating or something, but if the hairbrush was tracking your essence…"

Screwball gasped. "It was pointing to your heart! No wonder it went crazy!"

"We can cast the spell again, and if you always stay behind us, we could track your heart instead of you."

Trixie touched her chest and muttered, "I could feel love again."

Mothball laid a hoof on her shoulder and whispered, "You could finally love your daughter for real."

She lifted her head with wide eyes. "Moonbeam." She turned back to the wagon. "What do I tell her?"

Twilight shrugged. "The truth. If you're going to be Queen, she'll be next in line."

"What do you expect me to say? That I lied to her? That she's from a lineage of love-sucking parasites? That she might rule them someday?"

"Well, you might not want to put it in those exact words," Screwball said.

"You have to tell her," said Mothball.

"Tell me what?"

Trixie stiffened at the sound of Moonbeam's voice. The disguised filly was standing in the wagon's entrance, rubbing her eyes. Trixie looked pleadingly at Mothball.

"If she doesn't want to be with me anymore," she whispered, "take care of her."

He smiled. "Sure."

Trixie looked down at her daughter. "Moonbeam, honey, sit down. Mummy…has something to tell you."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Moonbeam said, holding up her booted hooves. "Let me get this straight. There's a whole swarm of changelings living in a giant hive somewhere that you're the princess of and their queen, *my* grandmother, is dying, so you have to go back and be their new queen and that's why all these ponies are here."

Trixie nodded. "Yes, that pretty much sums it up."

The filly blinked. "So if you're gonna be a queen, does that make me…a princess?"

Her mother shrugged. "I suppose so."

Moonbeam stared at her for a long while. "That…is…" She smiled brightly. "Awesome!"

The adults looked at each other in confusion.

"Huh?" Trixie uttered.

"Not only are there others like me," Moonbeam continued, "but I'm a *princess* too?! This is the best news ever! How come you never told me before?"

Her mother bit her lip. "Well, your grandmother and I didn't exactly part on good terms, so I couldn't really go back until now. It was best you didn't know about it. You're not mad, are you?"

"Why should I be? You're telling me now, aren't you? And how can I be mad when you're telling me I'm a *princess* ?!"

Screwball smiled. "I like this kid. Always looking on the bright side."

"You see, Moonbeam," Twilight said, "that's the real reason we all came here. We needed to find your mother so she could come back and take the changeling throne."

"As soon as possible too," Mothball added. "Mother doesn't have much time left, and she has to give Trixie the Royal Blessing."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Moonbeam asked, jumping up and down. "Let's go! Our stuff's all in the wagon anyway!"

"Not yet," Twilight explained. "First, we have to find…"

"The Royal Treasure!" Trixie finished quickly. "Yeah! It's kind of a test. Mother hid a special treasure that I have to find to prove myself."

Twilight stared at her in confusion. Trixie looked at her with pleading eyes and tilted her head towards Moonbeam.

"Err, right," Twilight said unsurely as she levitated the hairbrush into

view. "And this magic brush will help us find it."

"Cool!" Moonbeam beamed excitedly. "I *love* treasure hunts!"

"Then I guess we're off," Screwball declared.

The two tents then automatically folded into two suitcases. Screwball picked them up and hovered in the air.

"Come on!"

Mothball and Twilight flapped their wings to join her.

"Wait!" Trixie cried. "We can't fly there!"

Screwball rolled onto her back. "Why not?"

Trixie looked down at Moonbeam, who was staring at her bare back.

"Oh," Twilight said.

"But can't she fly in her changeling form?" Screwball asked. "Or just change into a pegasus?"

"She can't control her transformations," Trixie reminded her.

"And I can't fly," Moonbeam sadly admitted.

"How come?" Screwball inquired.

"I couldn't risk ponies seeing her out in the open," Trixie replied, "so I never got a chance to teach her."

"Hmm," the chaotic pony said as she tapped her chin. Then she grinned in excitement. "I know a way we can all fly!" She floated over to the caravan. "You don't mind if I make a few adjustments to this thing, do you?"

"Actually, I…" Trixie started to say.

Screwball didn't wait for her to finish. Two of the curls at the end of her tail unfurled and quickly brushed together, making a snapping sound. The wagon's roof opened and Trixie and Moonbeam gasped

as a giant pink balloon slowly emerged from it. As it rose in the air, its strings brought up a balcony large enough to cover where the roof once was.

Right before their eyes, their mobile home had become an air mobile home.

"Wow!" Moonbeam exclaimed. "That is so cool!"

Screwball blew on her hoof and rubbed it on her chest. "I also did a little renovating on the inside. You might want to get in there before it flies away."

Sure enough, as she was saying this, the balloon was slowly lifting the caravan off the ground. Trixie threw Moonbeam onto her back and leaped inside. The rest flew in after them. The mother and daughter gawked at how much more space there was.

They were in a living room containing two red sofas with yellow polka dots, an orange and green striped easy chair, a swirly purple and pink rug, a blue crescent-shaped coffee table and wide windows to look out on.

"It's bigger on the inside!" Moonbeam gasped.

"I figured we'd need more space with the five of us in here," Screwball explained, "or else we'd be all cramped. Come on, I'll show you the kitchen."

"Kitchen?" Trixie uttered.

They followed Screwball to the other side of the room, where another door stood. She opened it to reveal a clean kitchen with black and white tiles.

"The fridge and cupboards are stocked with lots of food," Screwball said. "Who knows how long we're gonna be on this trip?" She shut the door. "Now for downstairs."

They glanced around the room.

"Uh, Screwy?" Mothball said. "There aren't any stairs."

"There aren't?" Screwball gasped. "Oopsies!"

Her tail snapped again and a staircase appeared in the floor. Screwball guided them down to a hallway with four doors: one pink, one purple, one green and one blue.

"That one's my room," she said, pointing to the pink one. "The purple one's Twilight's, the green one's Mothy's, unless you want to have a room together." She smirked at her fiancé. "And the blue one's for Trixie and Moonbeam. Each room has its own bathroom, so we won't have to fight to pee. You can all check these out later. I want to finish the tour with the deck."

She flew back upstairs. When they returned to the second floor, they noticed another staircase going up. They found themselves outside on the large balcony Screwball had created.

"One of us should always be out here on lookout," she said, "in case there's any danger in the sky."

"Wow, Screwball," Twilight marveled. "This is quite impressive. You really thought of everything."

"I feel like a pirate!" Moonbeam said, leaning on the rail.

"Now we can navigate across Equestria with ease."

"I'm gonna go check out my new room! Mom, you coming?"

Trixie glanced at Twilight. "Mummy will catch up with you in a moment."

Once the filly was down below, Twilight narrowed her eyes at Trixie.

"Why didn't you tell her we were looking for your heart?"

Trixie scowled. "Would *you* want to tell your daughter that her mother doesn't love her?!"

"She has a point," Screwball shrugged.

"But what are you going to do once we find your heart and put it

back in you?" Mothball questioned. "How are you going to explain that?"

"She doesn't have to know," Trixie insisted. "She doesn't have to see it."

"What about when we get there and there's no treasure to back up your story?" Screwball asked.

"You have chaos magic. You could conjure up a gem or something."

"I thought you were done lying to Moonbeam," said Mothball.

"Trixie was lucky her daughter didn't hate her for hiding the fact that she was a princess, but this is something she'll never forgive her mother for."

She stormed below deck before anyone else could argue.

"Well," Twilight said as she lifted the hairbrush and illuminated her horn, "I guess we should get started."

I'm sorry to those of you who wanted Screwy to become a changeling for Mothball, but in all the different scenarios in my head, this was the best direction for me to go. Screwball and Mothball have learned their lessons, but Trixie still remains.

There's Always a Catch

Woo hoo! Been a while since I updated so fast! Fair warning, this has got to be one of the darkest chapters I've ever written.

Moonbeam and Trixie's room was decorated in starry wallpaper. Moonbeam spent the first twenty minutes of the voyage turning the lights on and off, for the decorative stars shone like real stars in the dark. Trixie lay on her blue canopy bed on the other side of the room, too deep in thought to be bugged by her daughter's antics.

She wondered what it would be like to see her mother again. Even if she wasn't dying, Trixie imagined it would be a most unpleasant reunion. They were never close, not even before Trixie was banished. She also wondered what she could do once she was Queen. If she were the same changeling she was twenty-five years ago, she would be fantasizing about servants giving her hooficures, washing her hair and bringing her tea and cakes.

Now she was thinking of ways to patch up the colony in the way her brother had envisioned. She had overheard him talking about it with Screwball this morning. Twilight most likely tagged along on this quest so she could form an alliance with the changelings. Since Trixie had no plans to take over Equestria anyway, that might be first on the agenda.

Then Trixie touched her chest and yearned for her heart to be back inside. That was the main reason she had agreed to take the throne. She wanted to feel again, and the changelings had had a heartless queen for too long. Based on what she had heard of her grandmother, Queen Arachne, she didn't think she had been the nicest ruler either.

She wasn't alone in this, she figured. The rest of the changelings were heartless too, except they had been born that way. It was because of that they couldn't help their hunger for love. Before, Trixie had not required it as much, but after removing her heart, it

became harder for her to survive without draining some pony every once in a while. Some nights she would go out in disguise and find some pony looking for a good time, which she was not proud of, but it was necessary to feed herself and her daughter whenever she had her special cravings.

Moonbeam still didn't know where her special food came from, and it was best left that way. Eventually she would learn what she could do now that she was going back to her roots, but she didn't have to know the details of her mother's hunts.

When Trixie felt she was going to have a seizure with the constant light flickering, she snapped at her daughter, "Would you stop that?!"

Moonbeam pressed the lamp one more time to light the room and grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry. I just can't get over this room! It's incredible! Aunt Screwy did a great job on this thing!"

Trixie sat up and raised an eyebrow. " *Aunt* Screwy?"

"She's marrying Uncle Mothy, so that makes her my future aunt, right?"

Her mother rolled her eyes. "Whatever, honey."

Moonbeam grabbed her back hooves and rocked back and forth on her bed. "So Mom, can you tell me more about this hive? Like are there changelings my age?"

"I'm sure there are. Mother gives birth every month or so, except for when she's not…" She quickly stopped herself. "Never mind."

"How come you told me Grandma was dead? And Uncle Mothy says you left home?"

"Mother kicked me out when I was eighteen, because she didn't think I was a good enough ruler. It was just for five years, but I'd grown used to being a pony. She didn't really like my decision. Best that you thought she was dead so you'd stop asking about her. She's not really the grandma type you want to associate yourself

with."

"Oh," Moonbeam responded, not really understanding what her mother was saying. "So do we have any other family besides her and Uncle Mothy?"

"Actually, the queen gives birth to all the changelings, so you technically have thousands of uncles and aunts."

The filly's jaw dropped. "No way! I'll have a lot of relatives to play with?!"

"Maybe some of the younger ones will play, but most of them will just treat you as their superior. You'd be next in line for the throne, after all."

"Does that mean *I'll* get to be Queen someday?"

Trixie sighed. "Yes, when I'm…gone, you will be crowned."

Moonbeam suddenly looked very nervous and glanced down at her boots. "You think they'll like me?"

Her mother shrugged. "You're royalty. They *have* to like you."

"Okay, but…well, since I'll be with a bunch of creatures who are just as strange as me, will I be able to…be myself?"

She pointed to her hat. Trixie's eyes widened.

"Sweetie," she said as she walked over to her daughter. "You do realize that even for a changeling, your special traits aren't normal?"

Moonbeam sighed. "I know, but maybe they won't mind?"

Trixie paused. "You're their princess, so they'll probably ignore it. However, now that you're going to be a princess, I'll have to start training you. We'll start work on your transformations and your flying. I'll even teach you how to cover those things up without the disguise."

Her daughter frowned. "Mom, don't you think…?"

"I'm not going to lie to you, sweetie. Once we get to the hive, things will be much different."

She smiled in confidence. Moonbeam tilted her head at her with a bemused expression. She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't help but get the feeling that her mother was hiding something.

"Well, okay," she said unsurely as she leaped off the bed. "I'm gonna go on deck and check out the view."

"Have fun," Trixie said with a wave.

Moonbeam flashed a smile which disappeared as soon as she was out the door. She looked back at her white disco pants and down at her red rubber boots. Then she put a hoof to her purple cap.

"Why do I always have to hide?" she murmured.

General Mantis woke from his nap and quickly turned his attention to the queen lying before him. He sighed in relief when he saw her chest rising and falling. It wasn't easy for him, seeing her so frail and helpless. He had seen her in similar states whenever they were imprisoned by Celestia, but this was different. In prison, there had always been hope for escape and Chrysalis was strong enough to endure the worst of torture. Right now, it was only a matter of time before her spiritual flame, which was once a roaring fire, would extinguish forever.

The general had always admired the headstrong queen. She was nearly a decade older than him, so he had known her all his life. Even as a teenager, she had always seemed to have a mind of her own, being the only one in the hive to have the guts to talk back to Queen Arachne. She also showed more power than even her own mother. He had witnessed her transformation into a chimera, when the fiercest thing he had seen Arachne turn into was a mere lion.

The day the former queen died and Chrysalis took the throne, Mantis had seen the uneasiness in the young princess and wanted to comfort her. He quickly became the queen's favorite and it wasn't

long before he was named General.

He had been there for everything: the Heartless Reformation, the attacks on Timbucktu, Trot, Canterlot, Ponyville, amongst countless other cities. He had even been there when Chrysalis had and lost both her heirs.

He didn't always agree with her decisions. He had advised against banishing her daughter and was horrified when he discovered she had removed her own heart. She had once thrown him in a volcano for making a mistake. Luckily, the accident had only left him with a singed and chipped horn, which he covered with a metal tip. Nevertheless, he always followed his orders.

He was more than just loyal to his queen. He would die for her.

But it seemed she was going to die first.

Chrysalis let out a soft groan as she slowly awoke.

"Good morning, your majesty," Mantis greeted softly.

She huffed. "What's so good about it? It just might be my last morning."

He bowed his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, my queen."

She rolled her head over to him. "Have you been here all night?"

"You shouldn't be alone, your majesty, when you…"

"Oh, cut the act, I know why you're really here."

His head shot up in confusion. "What do you mean, your majesty?"

She sighed. "You really think I never knew, Mantis? I can see into others' hearts, remember? You'll recall I never took yours during the Reformation like I did to the others? Since it was always directed towards me, I thought it'd do you good. Even if you seemed hesitant at times, you never fully disobeyed me. You're devoted to me. I don't need magic to see that."

Mantis looked away in shame. Chrysalis gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Frankly, Mantis, you're the closest thing to a friend I've ever had. I can always count on you to get things done and when I need a second opinion, you lend me your voice." She sighed sadly. "Don't tell anyone this, but it's times like this that I wonder if removing my heart was a good idea."

"It's my fault," Mantis whispered.

She shook her head. "You weren't the cause of my pain."

He boldly faced her again. "You *destroyed* yourself. You took a bow and shot yourself with it. I told you where to find the arrows."

Chrysalis rolled her eyes. "Splendid metaphor, but it was all *my* doing. I didn't have to take your advice."

"I just wanted your suffering to end. I had no idea you were going to destroy any chance of happiness you might have. I should've never sent you to him."

She scoffed. "Ironic, isn't it, Mantis? Mother always told me not to let my emotions get the best of me, but by getting rid of my emotions, I let them do just that."

Chrysalis had only been Queen for two weeks, and already complaints were being made about her. Whenever a changeling approached her with a problem, she said she would get back to them tomorrow, but never did. The soldiers, who wanted to pursue Arachne's vision, pleaded the new queen to meet with them to discuss their invasion plans on Equestria, but she kept putting it off. She spent most days in her chamber, though no one was sure what she did in there.

That was why Private Mantis was knocking at her door. General Halys had sent him because the queen seemed to favor him. He knew better than to question the general's decision.

"What?!" the queen snapped from inside.

Mantis jumped back. "P-Private Mantis, my queen."

There was silence for a moment, followed by a low groan.

"Come in."

He opened the door cautiously and found the queen pacing around her chamber.

"Is everything alright, my queen?" he asked.

She stopped and turned to him. "Yes, yes. Close the door, would you? All that buzzing is giving me a headache."

He obeyed her command and stepped fully in the room.

"Forgive the intrusion, your majesty, but the soldiers were wondering when we should begin our invasion on Equestria."

She groaned and collapsed on her bed. "You heard my mother. I have to produce an army strong enough to conquer Discord."

"Is that why you are so agitated, my queen? You are concerned about your first offspring?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't care less about offspring at the moment."

The words shocked the private, but he didn't dictate his thoughts.

"We might not have time to wait for new changelings to grow," he said. "The scouts have reported that the Equestrian princesses are already searching for a way to defeat Discord. They've sought refuge with Starswirl the Bearded. The general suggests we take them out first."

Chrysalis shook her head again. "No."

"Well then, should we start gaining Discord's trust? Since he seems fond of that Celestia, maybe if you take her form and pretend to be

on his side…"

"NO!" she shouted, sitting up on the bed.

He jumped, putting his hoof to his heart. Chrysalis sighed and lay back down. He wasn't sure what to do now. The queen seemed distraught, and Mantis felt the urge to comfort her. He levitated his helmet and took out a blue cornflower he had found in the forest that morning. He coughed nervously, catching the queen's attention. When she saw the flower, Chrysalis sat up, looking confused.

"I, uh…" he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck, "thought you could use something to brighten your day, your majesty."

Chrysalis illuminated her horn and took the flower from him. She stared at it longingly.

"You just don't understand, Mantis," she sighed. "I just… *can't* face him again. I want him to pay for hurting me, but…I also can't bear the thought of hurting him. If only there were a way I could face him without so much…conflict within me."

She set down the flower and levitated a stack of books.

"I have looked in every spell book I can find," she declared, "but the cure doesn't seem to be in here."

"What exactly are you looking for, your majesty?" Mantis beseeched.

"Something to mend my broken heart, something to rid me of this… this plague! I considered draining myself of emotions like we do to others, but since that never bodes well for the victims, I decided against it. I need a spell that can do that, but still keep my body intact!"

He watched as she writhed in agony. What she asked for sounded very serious, but he wanted to help her nonetheless. Then he remembered something else from the scouts' reports that might be of use to her, but he hesitated. It was a dangerous suggestion and could lead to horrific results. However, if it would ease his queen's pain, he had to take the risk.

"Perhaps, my queen," he said with a gulp, "you should consult someone with more…expertise."

"Like who?" Chrysalis snorted. "I doubt Discord would help me, and every other nearby wizard has gone into hiding."

"They might not be able to help you anyway. You said so yourself, what you're looking for cannot be found in any regular spell books. This kind of magic sounds like something that would be…forbidden."

She tapped her chin. "You're right. Ridding oneself of emotions is rather *dark* , isn't it? Why didn't I think of that before? Let's see, who do I know who knows a thing or two about dark magic?"

Mantis took a deep breath at what he was about to suggest. "A few days ago, the scouts from the north reported that the Crystal Empire has been taken over by an evil shadow pony."

"A shadow pony?" Chrysalis repeated, raising an eyebrow. "I thought those things had gone extinct."

"Apparently not. He calls himself Sombra, King of All Monsters. The scouts weren't able to find much information. They didn't dare get too close to the creature, but they said he wielded some of the darkest magic they had ever seen."

"Really?" she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps he could be of some help."

"Perhaps," Mantis said quietly.

Chrysalis fluttered her wings and rose from the floor. "I think I'll pay this Sombra a visit."

"But my queen!" he fearfully protested. "We don't know what this creature is capable of! Perhaps some of the soldiers should escort you…"

"I'll be fine on my own. If he tries anything, I'll just do what Mother taught me. Take care of things while I'm gone, Mantis."

"Me? But I'm just a low-rank private!"

"Not anymore. I'm promoting you to Lieutenant General."

His jaw dropped. "But…that's the highest rank below General!"

"Keep up the good work and you just might replace that idiot, Halys."

She winked at him before departing.

When Chrysalis reached the Crystal Empire, she disguised herself as a pegasus. Below her, the once dazzling crystal ponies now lacked luster and were in chains. They seemed to be digging for something, but Chrysalis didn't have time to ponder on that. She caught sight of a black unicorn in a fur-lined red cape overseeing his slaves on a balcony. His black mane moved like a shadow, his eyes glowed green and secreted smoke and his red horn was curved and pointy. Even Chrysalis shivered in his presence.

She landed behind him and greeted, "King Sombra, I presume?"

He turned around in alarm and scowled. His red horn glowed dangerously black.

"What are you doing up here?! How'd you escape?!"

Chrysalis rolled her eyes and changed into her true form. Sombra's magic diminished and he tilted his head in confusion.

"A changeling?"

"Queen of the Changelings, to be exact," Chrysalis said proudly.

He smirked and bowed. "Sincerest apologies, your majesty."

Sombra didn't mind the queen's presence. He had nothing against changelings.

"Now tell me," he said as he straightened up. "What brings you to my fair kingdom?"

She stepped forth. "I hear you are skilled in dark magic."

He shrugged. "Comes naturally for us shadow ponies."

"Well, I need a spell, something that regular magic cannot accomplish. If you can help me, my army will be at your disposal, should those goody-four-shoes princesses come to dethrone you."

The king rubbed his chin with interest. "What sort of spell?"

"Something that can rid one of emotions, specifically love."

He scoffed. "Don't you changelings already do that?"

"Yes, but it is forbidden for a changeling to do that to another, and even if that wasn't the case, it would leave the victim weak and helpless."

"This spell wouldn't happen to be for…yourself, now would it?"

Chrysalis did not reply.

"Very well. Keep your secrets. I think I know what you're looking for. Follow me."

He led her into the castle, which was quite dark on the inside. In the middle of the throne room floor was a large staircase leading underground. When he gestured for her to follow, she illuminated her horn not just for light, but in case the king was leading her into a trap.

The spiral staircase was long and winding, and it felt like hours before they reached the bottom. There was a door with a black crystal above it. Sombra lit his horn and shot a beam into the gem. The door opened into a study. As they went in, he pulled a book off a shelf and opened it on his desk.

"Let's see," he said as he skimmed through the pages. "It should be…there!"

He tapped his hoof on the open page. Chrysalis peered over his shoulder and read its contents.

"The Heartless Spell," he said aloud. "This is guaranteed to cure you of your broken heart."

She looked at him with wide eyes. He sighed sadly.

"Let's just say I know what you're going through."

Chrysalis took a moment to look into his heart. There wasn't much love left in it, but she saw that it was all directed towards a fuchsia crystal unicorn mare with a luscious turquoise mane.

"Let me guess," she smirked. "She didn't agree with your political views."

He scowled at her. "You keep your secrets and I'll keep mine."

Chrysalis shrugged and looked back at the spell. As she read it over, her eyes widened in fear.

"It says here that I have to…separate my heart from my body?"

"Don't worry, it's completely painless," Sombra assured her. "Probably."

"But…if I don't have my heart…won't I…?"

"Only if you don't do the spell right. See, this will enchant your heart so that you will still live, but you won't be connected to the emotions it produces, including love. After all, you can't have a broken heart if you don't have a heart to break."

She touched the part of her chest where her heartbeat was. "I won't be hurting anymore?"

He shrugged. "It should take most of the pain away, but not all emotions come from the heart. It says here you won't be able to feel love. However, you should know that where dark magic is concerned, there's always a cost. If you remove your heart, you may find yourself in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. Since you're a changeling, it might have different effects on you. That's why I never tried this spell on myself. Besides," he hung his head, "pain and heartbreak is what's kept me going."

"Whatever the price," Chrysalis said in determination, "I'm willing to pay it."

She just wanted the pain to go away.

"Very well," Sombra said. "Can't say I didn't warn you."

Chrysalis read the book's instructions carefully and readied herself for the spell. She illuminated her horn and focused intently on her hoof. It soon gave off an equal glow. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she plunged her glowing hoof into her chest. It went straight through as if her chest were nonexistent. Chrysalis let out a cry as she clenched her hoof around the squishy organ.

She brought it out and opened her eyes. In her hoof was a glowing green heart, still thumping with life. She touched her chest with her other hoof and felt nothing inside.

That wasn't all that was different. The pain, the agony that had been plaguing her for weeks, had vanished. Just like that.

Sombra levitated an ivory chest in front of her and indicated her to put the heart in. She did so and after giving the organ one last glance, shut the lid over it.

"You'll want to keep it safe," the king said. "Your life force is still connected to it, so if your heart is damaged…well, you get the picture." He smirked. "So, your majesty, how do you feel now?"

"I…I feel," she stammered, not taking her eyes off the box in her hooves. "I feel…"

She felt nothing, at least emotionally. Her senses had rapidly gone cold without her heart to keep them flowing. However, another organ which still remained within her was churning. With not much else to suppress it, the sensation bubbled inside her and spread to the rest of her body. Soon, she could think of nothing else.

"I feel…" she said again, "hungry."

She turned her head slowly toward Sombra, her eyes shimmering green. The king backed away in fear, knowing what changelings fed on. The queen hissed and pounced on him, pinning him against the wall.

"I helped you!" Sombra reminded her. "You're not going to…? Are you?"

She smirked smugly. "No."

She released him and he slid down to the floor with a relieved sigh.

"Thank the shadows. But I thought you changelings flourished on the emotions of others."

"Yes, but it's a certain emotion I'm craving for, one you seem to lack of."

"W-which one is it?" Sombra asked nervously.

Her lips curled into a sinister smile. "You wouldn't mind if I snacked on a few of your crystal ponies, would you?"

First time Sombra makes an official appearance in my stories. His origin comic brought me to tears! Well, since every major disaster seemed to have happened a thousand years before the show, I figured Sombra would be around at the time, and we don't know exactly how long he was in power. I also figured Chrysalis had to have gotten that Heartless Spell from somewhere and Sombra was the first dark magic user that came to mind.

Reveal

This is very short, but the next few chapters are going to be monsters.

"So is it true that changelings came from a magic bug-eating tree?" Moonbeam asked Mothball as they leaned on the deck rail.

"Nah," Mothball said, waving his hoof. "Mother just tells that story to scare ponies."

"Then where *do* they come from?"

Screwball laughed and patted her on the head. "You'll find out when you're older, kid."

They'd been flying for a while now with Twilight at the head of the ship. She had cast a spell to bind the brush to the ship so that it could pull it along. It seemed to have the heart's trail, as it didn't point below deck. However, every now and then Twilight had to recalibrate it so it could cover a wider radius. She had a map open in front of her so she could keep track of where they were going.

Moonbeam had been conversing with her uncle and future aunt with great alacrity, asking questions about the hive, how the two of them met and when they were getting married. That last question was met with blushes from both parties.

As they passed over the Drackenridge Mountains, Moonbeam leaned over the rail and gazed down at the landscape in wonder.

"Wow!" she shouted. "I've never seen Equestria from above! What a view!"

"Careful," Mothball warned. "Don't lean too far."

Suddenly, a gust of wind came and blew Moonbeam's cap off her

head.

"My hat!" she cried.

She reached out her hooves to grab it but all that did was cause her to fall over the rail. Mothball caught her in time and Screwball used her magic to bring the hat back.

"Don't worry, I got it," she assured the filly.

"What did I tell you?" Mothball said as he brought his niece back on deck. "You should really be more…"

He trailed off when he caught sight of her horn and tilted his head curiously at it. Trixie had said there were some things Moonbeam couldn't hide in pony form, but he had assumed they were changeling parts. This horn was gray and had no holes in it.

"Hey, neat horn!" Screwball complimented.

"Oops!" Moonbeam exclaimed. She grabbed her hat and was about to put it on when she paused. "Wait. You think it's neat?"

"Of course. Very unique."

Twilight, who had overheard Screwball's praises, turned her attention away from her map and went to examine Moonbeam's horn herself.

"How peculiar," she marveled. "I've never seen a unicorn horn, let alone a changeling horn, that was a different color from the rest of the body. Is this a part of your disguise?"

Moonbeam hung her head. "Not really. It's always there."

"But it's perfectly solid and straight! Very unusual for a changeling."

"I think it rocks," Screwball declared.

Moonbeam smiled. "Really? You don't think it's weird?"

"Have you *seen* my eyes? Besides, what makes you weird also

makes you special."

This filled the filly with a great confidence that made up her mind on something she'd been thinking about all day. "Well, if you think this is cool, wait until you see this!"

She sat down and tried to pry off her boots with her magic, but they were stuck again. She looked up at Screwball.

"Can you lend me a hoof?"

The chaotic pony nodded and the boots popped right off. Twilight gasped in amazement.

"Are those hooves…cloven?"

"That's not all! Get a load of this!"

As she began to slide off her pants, her mother was coming up the stairs. Trixie gasped when she saw her daughter stripping down, already more than half out of her disguise.

"Moonbeam, stop!"

Startled, the filly looked up and accidentally tore the pants down the rear. Her tufted tail flicked out for everyone to see. This was the most surprising discovery for the adults, who all gasped. Trixie quickly moved in front of her daughter and tried to block her from view.

"Don't look!" she cried.

"Mom, it's okay," Moonbeam tried to say.

"Look away! There's nothing to see here!"

Trixie was without her cape at the moment and her tail brushed by Moonbeam's nose. The filly sneezed into her changeling form. The horn, hooves and tail remained the same, though the tail's cord had gone black like the rest of her body. Screwball levitated Trixie to the other side of the boat so they could all get a better look.

"What in the world?" Screwball uttered.

"Most curious," Twilight said, rubbing her chin.

"Was her father a cow or something?"

"Technically, he'd be a bull."

"That explains why she smells like bull," Mothball muttered.

"Mothy!" Screwball exclaimed.

"He wasn't a bull," Moonbeam said. "He was…"

"Don't!" Trixie bellowed, tramping over to her.

"Mom, what's the point? They've already seen me."

"Shut up! You've done enough damage as it is!" She used her magic to grab her daughter by the ear. "You're staying in your room for the rest of the trip!"

"But Mom!"

"No 'buts!' You and I are going to have a long talk, young lady!"

"DADDY WAS A MINOTAUR!"

Trixie shrieked and dropped her. She glanced around nervously at the other adults. Mothball had his nose scrunched and Screwball had her brow raised.

"A minotaur?" she said with a smirk.

"Well," Twilight shrugged, "that's one I've never heard before."

Trixie blinked. "That…doesn't weird you out?"

"Girl," Screwball said, narrowing her eyes. "I'm half draconequus, I'm getting married to a changeling, my brother's best friend is half dragon, one of *my* best friends prefers other mares to stallions. Unconventional romances aren't exactly new to us."

"See?" Moonbeam huffed.

Trixie looked at everyone and sighed in defeat. There was no point in hiding now.

"Yes, Moonbeam's father was a minotaur."

Screwball tapped her chin. "By any chance was this minotaur named Iron Will?"

Trixie looked up in shock. "Uh…yes. How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch. He helped my mom become more assertive. He was this big, tough guy, kinda show-offish, always referring to himself in the third-person…" She trailed off in thought. "Yeah, I can sort of see it."

"I told you they'd be okay with it!" Moonbeam exclaimed as she stretched out her hooves. "Now I don't have to wear those stupid pants and boots anymore! I still like that hat though."

"I hear ya," Screwball giggled as the cap floated onto the filly's head.

"Come on, Uncle Mothy! Wanna see my room light up?"

She grabbed his hoof before he could reply. Trixie looked on in bewilderment.

"So," Screwball whispered smugly. "What was it like sleeping with a minotaur?"

The unicorn scowled. "I am *not* answering that."

"Oh, come on!" Screwball called as Trixie stomped away. "We're future sisses-in-law! We're supposed to share embarrassing stories!"

Mantis continued to pay vigil to Chrysalis as she lay in bed, patiently awaiting the end. She seemed to grow paler by the minute, and her eyes were so clouded, one would think she had gone blind. It

wouldn't be long now. Arachne had barely been bedridden for a day before she passed.

"It's quite amazing how long you've lasted," Mantis accidentally said aloud.

Her head snapped towards him. "What?"

He jumped back. "S-sorry, your majesty. It's just that your mother didn't even last a day when she… You must be more resilient."

Chrysalis looked down at herself. "I think I know why."

She gestured for him to lean closer.

"My heart," she whispered. "The nurse changelings said the Royal Illness makes its way to the heart. That's why I'm not gone yet."

The general's eyes widened. "So…if the sickness never reaches your heart…does that mean…you'll live?"

"Maybe. But with no cure, I'll be in a state of endless suffering." She sighed. "That means there's only one thing to do now."

She pulled him closer. "Mantis, go to the vault."

The general's eyes fluttered in shock. "My queen?"

"Go to the vault. Bring back my heart. You're the only one I trust with it."

He stared at her for a long moment and nodded slowly. She released him and he saluted.

"I won't fail you, my queen."

"You can't go alone," she said before he could march away. "Take Acari and Bombus with you."

His jaw dropped. "Bombus?!"

"You know what you need to enter the vault."

"Yes, but *Bombus* ?! Acari, I understand, but *Bombus* ?!"

"Please!" she groaned. "He's been trying to cheer me up all day!"

The door swung open and the topic of their discussion hovered in the doorway with a bowl of green blob in his hooves.

"Look, your majesty!" the lieutenant chirped. "I made you a snot fudge sundae! Using my own mucus!"

Chrysalis gritted her teeth at the general. "Just get him out of here!"

Mantis nodded and flew past Bombus. "Lieutenant, I need you for a special mission."

Bombus dropped the sundae as he saluted. "Sir, yes sir!"

"Acari?" the general called out.

A slim, female changeling in light blue armor buzzed in front of the general.

"Captain Acari, reporting for duty, sir!" she said with a salute.

Mantis grinned in approval. *At least I'll have* one *soldier who's disciplined.*

"Come along, you two. We have a long way to travel."

"Can we get a snack on the way?" Bombus asked.

Acari and Mantis rolled their eyes.

"A *very* long way, it would seem," the captain grumbled.

If you haven't figured out who this lesbian friend of Screwball's is, I'm surprised you didn't catch it in Chapter Two.

Of Hearts and Minds

Apologies. I've had a crazy couple of weeks, what with me starting my new summer job and my grandpa passing away...

Anyway, here you go.

"So then I said to Sergeant Hornet: boy, that sure was a *sticky* situation!"

Lieutenant Bombus burst out laughing while General Mantis and Captain Acari rolled their eyes and groaned.

"With all due respect, General," Acari whispered, "why did we have to bring *him* along?"

"Queen's orders," Mantis grumbled. "Not mine."

"So, Acari," Bombus said as he flew up to the captain's side, "how's your food supply?"

"I'm satisfied," Acari bluntly replied. "Why?"

"Just wondering. But if you ever need a refill," he flashed a sultry look, "I'm willing to share."

Acari narrowed her eyes and threw her hoof in his face.

"Ouch!" Bombus cried out, rubbing his jaw. "A simple 'no' would've sufficed."

"Lieutenant," Mantis groaned, "how many times have I told you not to harass the female soldiers, especially when we're on duty?"

"Besides," Acari snorted, "you forget we're all related."

"Hey!" Bombus protested. "That doesn't seem to bother the general here!"

Mantis spun around with glaring eyes. "Excuse me?!"

"Oh, come on, dude! It's not like nobody in the hive knows how you feel about the queen! We're changelings, after all!"

The general said nothing and continued forward. Acari jabbed Bombus in the ribs.

"Nice going, Lieutenant," she whispered harshly before following her superior.

"What'd I say?" Bombus asked as he went after them.

"Just keep quiet for *five minutes* , please!" Mantis grunted.

The lieutenant shut his mouth and waited exactly five minutes before speaking again.

"So what's it like?"

The general groaned. "What?"

"Having a heart. You know, other than the prince, you're the only changeling left who still has his heart. The rest of us were born without them. So…is it worth it?"

"Hearts produce love," Acari said gruffly. "Love is for the weak, which the strong must use against them. If we had any such emotions to distract us in battle, we'd all be extinct."

"Hey," Bombus said with a shrug. "That never stopped the general, and he's the best general we've ever had. At least, I think so, since he's the only general I've ever known, but he's really great! And no offense, Acari, but we lost a heck of a lot of those battles despite our lack of distractions and, surprisingly, the winners of at least two of those battles had love on their side."

The captain snorted. "They just got lucky."

"You wouldn't want to be in my situation anyway, Lieutenant," Mantis sighed. "Yes, I have the ability to love, but it's a curse I've been forced to bear my whole life. I wish the queen hadn't spared me

during the Reformation. She thought she was doing me a favor, but instead, she's punished me for all eternity. Nonetheless, I have my duty to consider before my emotions, as is the way of the soldier."

"You ever thought of telling her all this?" Bombus asked. "I mean I'm sure she knows, but maybe once she has her heart back…"

"It doesn't matter!"

The two soldiers jumped back at their leader's outburst. Mantis hung his head as he pressed forward.

"It doesn't matter," he repeated. "She'll be gone soon, anyway."

In the living room of the ship, Screwball, Mothball and Moonbeam, who had sneezed back into pony form and was wearing only her cap; were sitting around the coffee table with cards in their hooves.

"Got any eights?" Screwball asked Moonbeam.

"Uno!" the filly said, waving her single card.

Screwball picked a card from the pile and laid her cards down. "Gin!"

Mothball lowered his cards in confusion. "What are we playing again?"

"Every pony!" Twilight shouted from above deck. "Land ho!"

Trixie poked her head out of the kitchen. "We're there?"

"Yes! And you're not gonna believe where the brush led us!"

Everyone rushed up the stairs to see what Twilight was talking about. The alicorn was looking over the rail in disbelief. When the others joined her, their eyes beheld an enormous, dark, run-down castle on top of a swirling hill in the middle of a dreary brown forest. Below it stood the ruins of a village, covered in a dark green substance that looked like old crystalized mucus. The same substance covered lower parts of the castle.

"Where are we?" Screwball asked.

"The Forest of Leota," Twilight replied.

"Hey," Mothball said. "This is where the changelings were banished after the siege of Canterlot."

"So Trixie's…" Screwball paused as the unicorn gave her a warning glare. "… *treasure* is in that castle?"

"Definitely," Twilight said, holding up the blinking brush for emphasis.

"Huh," Trixie huffed. "Seems a little sloppy for Mother to hide something so valuable in one of her old hideouts. Then again, she does have a thing for old and abandoned places."

"So we get to explore a creepy, possibly-haunted old castle?" Moonbeam inquired. "Cool! Let's go!"

"Hold it, young lady! You're staying right here where it's safe!"

In truth, she didn't want her daughter to see the heart when it was retrieved.

"Aw, come on!" Moonbeam whined, crossing her forelegs. "You never let me go anywhere!"

"Your mother is right," said Twilight. "There's no telling what dangers lurk in the castle."

"I'm not scared."

"Seriously, that castle is not something you want to take lightly. Why, last time my friends and I were in there, there were doors leading to strange rooms, disembodied voices talking in riddles, winding staircases in all directions…"

"Sounds like home," Screwball snorted. "I think the kid will be fine if I'm around to take care of any booby traps or monsters."

Trixie scowled at Screwball and was about to say something when

the chaotic pony clapped her hooves together and an anchor dropped over the edge.

"Come on, slow pokes!" she exclaimed as she slid down the anchor's rope. "I thought we were on a tight schedule here!"

Twilight sighed as she flapped her wings. "Just like her father. Always acting on impulse."

Mothball followed the alicorn's example while Trixie sprouted wings and Moonbeam went down the rope after Screwball. When they reached the ground, they gazed up at the castle in awe.

"It looks smaller from this angle," Moonbeam observed.

"Try this," Screwball said as she bent backward and stuck her head between her legs.

Moonbeam could not bend that way, so she turned around and bent down to look out through her legs.

"Oh yeah, much more intimidating!" she chirped.

Trixie looked accusingly at Mothball. "Trixie thinks your fiancée is a bad influence on Moonbeam."

The prince shook his head. "Bad? No. Unusual? For sure."

"Every pony, stay close," Twilight said as she led the group inside. "I've been here before, but Chrysalis might have upgraded security since then. We must be ready for anything."

"Noted," Screwball said as she summoned a baseball bat.

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Trixie thinks we'll need more than that for protection."

"Hmm. You're right."

The bat transformed into a frying pan. Trixie put a hoof to her head.

"Hey," Screwball said. "Never underestimate the power of a frying

pan."

As the group approached the castle's large door, Twilight, Mothball and Trixie illuminated their horns while Trixie held her daughter behind her back. The door automatically opened with a long, slow creak. They were about to step inside when a horrid, upside-down pink face jumped out at them. Mothball and Trixie staggered back screaming.

"Cool!" Moonbeam piped.

"What *is* that thing?!" Trixie exclaimed.

Screwball twisted her head upside-down to get a better look at the thing. It appeared to be an empty pink pony costume with an oversized head and bulging plastic eyeballs.

"It looks kinda like Aunt Pinkie," she observed aloud.

After composing herself, Twilight explained, "It is. She made it. Don't ask why. I commend Chrysalis for her attempt at poetic justice."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mothball inquired.

"Long story. Come on. It won't hurt us."

Twilight used her magic to toss the hideous costume out of the way. Every pony gasped at the castle's interior. As Twilight had said, there were staircases twisting in every direction with sideways doors and once they were inside, a voice spoke from nowhere:

" *To find what you seek*

You must take a peek

Behind the right door

Or face horrors galore. "

"This *is* like home!" Screwball exclaimed. "So I guess we try all these doors until we find the right one. I call the ones on the ceiling!"

"Actually, we won't have to try all the doors," Twilight said as she levitated the blinking brush into view. "The brush will show us the way."

Screwball floated down to the floor with a pout. "Way to spoil the fun, Auntie Twilight."

"Can we still see what's behind the other doors?" Moonbeam asked eagerly.

"We don't have time," Mothball said. "Which way, Twilight?"

The alicorn stepped forward and watched as the brush slowly turned right. "This way!"

They followed the hairbrush up a staircase to a green door with a heart etched in the wood.

"No, it *can't* be that obvious," Trixie grumbled.

"What's so obvious about it?" Moonbeam questioned as she tilted her head.

"This is it," Twilight declared as she touched the doorknob. "Ow!"

She retracted her hoof as a spark of electricity shot through her.

"Look!" Screwball pointed.

Inside the heart engraving, a series of strange markings appeared that to Twilight, Screwball and Moonbeam looked like squiggles.

"What in the world?" Screwball uttered.

"I've never seen writing like this," Twilight marveled.

"They're ancient changeling runes," Trixie explained.

"Before Equestrian writing was developed," Mothball continued, "this was what our ancestors used."

"So you know what it says?" Twilight asked.

"Of course," Trixie replied. "All changelings are required to know it from childhood. We use it to pass secret messages to each other, especially when we're undercover."

"So what does this say?" Screwball inquired.

"It says…" Trixie turned pale and glanced nervously at her daughter. "Um…"

" *No heart shall pass through here* ," Mothball finished.

"What does that mean?" Moonbeam asked.

Screwball shrugged. "Probably just threatening ponies not to steal the heart in there."

"Heart?"

Trixie growled at Screwball, who quickly thought up a lie.

"Err…that's the name of the treasure! It's called, uh, the Heart!"

"Oh," Moonbeam replied. "So it's like a golden heart or something?"

"Yeah, sure," Trixie said, pushing through. "Can we just go in already?"

"Okay, hold your horses," Screwball said as she reached for the knob.

But as soon as she touched it, she was electrocuted just like Twilight.

"Let me try," Mothball offered.

But the same happened to him. Moonbeam reached to try it herself, but her mother stopped her hoof.

"No biggie," Screwball shrugged. "Who needs a door when you've got magic?"

She vanished and then reappeared a second later and was thrown back by an invisible force. Mothball knelt down to her side.

"I can't teleport in there!" Screwball gasped.

"Figures," Trixie said, shaking her head. "Mother built this vault against her enemies, and Discord was one of her greatest. It makes sense she would cast spells that would repel chaos magic."

"There must be a way in," Mothball insisted. "Mother would still have to create a way to get in herself."

"Maybe there's a clue somewhere," Moonbeam suggested. "There's always a clue around magically sealed doors."

"A clue," Twilight said as she squinted at the changeling runes. "A clue! That's it! That message isn't a threat. It's a riddle!"

" *No heart shall pass through here* ?" Screwball said, scratching her head. "What could that…?"

Then her eyes widened and so did Mothball's as he came up with the same answer. Everyone except Moonbeam turned to Trixie, who was still confused.

"Why you all looking at Trixie like that?"

"Trixie," Twilight said slowly. "Do you know why Screwball, Mothball and I weren't able to open the door? Think about it. What do we all have that you don't?"

Trixie's eyes widened as she realized what they were all implying. "No, no. It can't…"

"Just try, Trixie," Mothball said.

Trixie turned to the door and took a deep breath. She reached out and twisted the knob. It clicked and the door opened into a dark staircase.

"Clever, Mother," she muttered. "Very clever."

"Mom?"

Trixie looked back at her daughter. "Not now, honey. Mummy's got a

treasure to fetch."

"Mom, how come you can open the door when they couldn't?"

The unicorn bit her lip. "Your mummy's just more powerful, that's all."

"And what did Princess Twilight mean when she said they all have something you don't?"

"Moonbeam, I don't have time for this."

"And what did the message mean when it said no heart could pass through?"

"We'll discuss this later!"

Trixie was about to descend into the darkness when Moonbeam grabbed her leg. The filly was glaring up at her with impatience.

"No, Mom! I'm sick of you hiding stuff from me! What's going on here?"

Mothball sighed. "Trixie, just tell her."

"There's nothing *to* tell!" Trixie shouted as she attempted to shake her daughter off. "The reason Mummy was able to open the door is not important! What is important is that I get down there and get back my heart!"

Moonbeam blinked. "Your *what* ?!"

Trixie covered her mouth, but it was too late. The words had already slipped.

"Mom, did you just say your *heart* ?" Moonbeam asked again.

Trixie stared down at her daughter for a long while, unsure of how to respond. Twilight, Screwball and Mothball backed away to give the two some space. Finally, Trixie let out a sigh.

"Mummy hasn't been honest with you, Moonbeam. We're not here

for a treasure, though it is something very valuable. Down there, probably locked away in a vault or something, is a heart. *My* heart."

Moonbeam let go of her mother's leg. "That…that's ridiculous! Your heart can't be down there." She touched the left side of her mother's chest. "See? It's right…"

She paused as her mouth twisted in confusion. She moved her hoof around her mother's chest, searching for a thump.

She felt nothing.

"But…" she uttered.

Trixie lowered her daughter's hoof and lifted her little chin so she could look her in the eye. Even without her heart, she knew this was going to hurt.

"You see, honey," she began slowly, "when your father left and broke my heart, the pain was too much to bear. I went back to my mother and had her cast a spell to remove my heart…so I would never love again."

Moonbeam shook her head. "N-no. That's impossible. You…you said you loved me."

Trixie winced. "That's…not necessarily true."

"You don't love me?" the filly choked as her eyes glistened with tears.

"I didn't know I was going to have you when I did it. I…I care for you in the way that you're the only reason I'm still living, but…"

"You don't love me."

"It's not that I *don't* love you, sweetie. I just *can't* !"

"So," Moonbeam sniffed, "you lied when you said you loved me?"

Trixie moved her hoof to wipe her daughter's tears. "Honey…"

The filly scowled and turned her back to her mother. If this sight was hurting Trixie now, she could only imagine what this would be like with all her emotions.

"Sweetie, I didn't mean to…"

"You lied!" Moonbeam snapped. "I can understand why you didn't tell me all that changeling stuff, but *this* ?! This…this is…"

Trixie laid a hoof on her shoulder. "Moonbeam…"

"Get away!" the filly shouted as she raced to Mothball.

"Moonbeam, please! You have to listen to me! Having my heart removed was the worst mistake I ever made! I've regretted it every single day since you were born! But that's all going to change. Once I have my heart back, I'll be the mother you've always wanted, the mother you *deserve* ! No foal should be with a parent who doesn't love them."

Moonbeam stared at her mother and then buried her face in her uncle's leg as she sobbed. Trixie hung her head in shame. Twilight approached her.

"You can still fix this," she whispered. "Once you're able to love again, she'll forgive you."

Trixie looked back through the door and down the dark staircase.

"Will you be alright down there?" Twilight asked.

The unicorn nodded as she illuminated her horn. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has faced worse."

The alicorn rolled her eyes and shook her head with a smile as she watched her friend disappear into the darkness.

Normally, Trixie would've been nervous descending a dark stairway with no knowledge of what was on the bottom, but she was too determined to fix her mistakes to be afraid. However, she still remained cautious. A riddle couldn't be the only thing guarding her heart. Her mother wasn't that careless.

After what felt like hours of walking, she spotted some light up ahead. When her back hooves left the bottom step, she found herself in a circular room. Her horn glowed brighter so she could get a better look at her surroundings. The stone walls were covered in crystalized mucus that surrounded several small holes which looked like they once contained something.

Trixie put her hoof to her chest as she felt a sudden tingle. She glanced down and waited for it to return, but nothing happened. She shrugged and stepped further into the room. Her chest tingled again. Curious, she slowed her pace. The closer she got to the back wall, the stronger the sensation became.

On the far end of the room, a faint green light glimmered. Trixie squinted at the wall and saw that the glow was coming from behind the mucus. She shot a beam at it and destroyed the green substance.

Behind it was a small niche containing two chests. One was ivory and faded with time. The other was crystal and was the source of the glow. Like the feeling inside Trixie, the crystal box glowed brighter as she got closer. She lifted the lid and stared in awe at the beating green heart.

It was calling to her, now that it was within her grasp. She was about to touch it when she realized she didn't know how to put it back in. Perhaps one of the others would know.

So she closed the chest and looked curiously at the ivory one. She opened it to find another heart, though its green glow was very faint.

There was no doubt whose heart this was. All the changelings whose hearts were removed during the Reformation had died out centuries ago, and their hearts had crumbled to dust as a result. At least, that was what her mother had told her.

Trixie stared at her mother's heart in wonder. She knew the queen wasn't dead yet. Would her heart crumble to dust? Would she die without knowing what it was like to feel again?

As much as she resented her mother, Trixie couldn't wish that fate

on her.

So she closed the chest and levitated it along with the crystal one.

"You got it?" Twilight called when Trixie's aura appeared in the darkness.

"Yup," the unicorn replied when she reached the top. "Trixie got Mother's too."

"Really?" Mothball said as he stared at the two boxes.

"Why's that one glowing?" Screwball asked, pointing to the crystal chest.

"It's mine," Trixie explained as she opened it. "It must know I'm near."

Moonbeam's eyes widened as they beheld the glowing green heart. "That's…your heart?"

"Yes, Moonbeam," her mother replied as she levitated the organ into her hoof. "My emotions…they're all here."

There was a long pause.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Screwball inquired.

"I…" Trixie stammered. "I don't know how to do it. Mother knows the spell."

Twilight rubbed her chin and looked at Screwball. "Maybe your chaos magic can…"

Screwball shrugged. "Worth a shot."

She took the heart and looked up at Trixie. "You sure this is what you want? You said so yourself you couldn't handle it before."

Trixie glanced at Moonbeam and took a deep breath. "Do it."

Screwball's hoof glowed yellow and the heart turned transparent. She held her breath as she slid it into Trixie's chest.

Trixie cried out in agony, making Screwball retract her hoof in alarm. The unicorn gripped her chest and collapsed to her knees.

"Mom!" Moonbeam exclaimed, rushing to her mother's side. "Mom, are you okay?!"

Trixie opened her eyes and turned her head to the filly. Familiar warmth welled up inside her, something she hadn't felt in years. It instantly brought tears to her eyes.

"Moonbeam?" she choked.

"Mom?" the filly said, tilting her head. "Are you…crying?"

Trixie smiled and nodded. "Yes. Yes, I am." She sniffed. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Moonbeam scrunched her nose. "Mom, you're not making sense."

"Maybe this will make sense."

She wrapped her hooves around her daughter and pulled her close. She sobbed loudly as she stroked her precious filly's mane.

"Oh, Moonbeam," she whispered. "Oh, my sweet Moonbeam. Mummy's so, so sorry. She didn't mean to lie to you. It just… happened. I never should've forced you to hide yourself. I thought I was trying to protect you, but the truth is…I just didn't want to be reminded of your father."

Moonbeam looked up at her mother. "Really?"

"Really." She then removed her baseball cap. "Oh, Moonbeam. You're so beautiful."

Now Moonbeam was tearing up. "Really?"

Trixie nodded and hugged her again. "You always have been, and… I love you. Oh, sweetie, I love you so much."

The others grinned as they watched the mother and daughter have their long-overdue moment.

Then Twilight frowned as a troubling thought entered her mind.

"Any pony else think this was a little too easy?"

"Maybe," Screwball said with a shrug. "But why complain?"

"It's just…I thought there would be more obstacles, considering this is Chrysalis we're dealing with. There should've at least been a…"

She was cut off as the front door slammed open behind them. Everyone spun around to see who had entered. Screwball recognized the general and Lieutenant Bombus, but the third changeling in light blue armor was new. They were all surprised to see their prince, his fiancée, the Princess of Friendship and the two strangers.

"Your highness?" General Mantis questioned as he buzzed over to them. "What are you doing here?"

"And with an Equestrian princess, no less!" Captain Acari hissed.

"Hi, Miss Screwball!" Lieutenant Bombus waved.

"Wow!" Moonbeam exclaimed as she trotted up to the soldiers. "More changelings! Though what's with the armor? Are you guys warriors or something?"

The three soldiers looked down curiously at the strange filly.

"And *what* is *this* ?" Acari snarled.

Bombus sniffed the air and gasped. He quickly went down to his knees.

"Forgive us, your highness! We did not realize!"

"Huh?" Moonbeam said, tilting her head.

Mantis and Acari took a whiff too and followed the lieutenant's example. Moonbeam scrunched her nose.

"What are you guys doing?"

"You're a royal," Acari said, lifting her head. "Who are you, your highness?"

"She's my daughter," Trixie said, putting her hoof around Moonbeam, "and your next queen after me."

Mantis looked up and sniffed. His eyes widened.

"Princess Bellatrix!"

"You can get up, General," said Trixie.

The soldiers rose and Acari gritted her teeth.

"So, you found her after all."

"Nice to see you too, Acari," Trixie groaned.

" *Captain* Acari."

"You know each other?" Bombus asked.

"She and I were playmates," Trixie explained.

Acari rolled her eyes. "It was more like you bossing me and the other changeling children around than us being playmates."

Trixie narrowed her eyes. "I'd watch your tone, if I were you, *Captain* ."

"She's right," Mantis nodded. "She is our queen-to-be, after all. But your highnesses, what are you all doing here?"

"What are *you* guys doing here?" Mothball inquired.

"We came to retrieve the queen's heart."

Screwball raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"That is none of your concern."

"Sorry, but we beat you to it," Trixie said, levitating the ivory box. "We came here to get my heart and found Mother's along with it."

"Really?" Mantis blinked. "Then you've already defeated the monster?"

Trixie, Mothball, Screwball, Moonbeam and Twilight stiffened and said, " *What* monster?"

Suddenly, the ground shook and a roar echoed throughout the castle.

" *That* monster!" Mantis cried.

Twilight stomped her hoof. "I *knew* this was too easy!"

What? Did YOU think it would be that easy?

Unleashed

Ugh. I hope this is enough action for you in this story. Action scenes aren't my forte.

"I should've guessed!" Trixie shouted as she tried to pinpoint the source of the earthquake. "These places are always guarded by monsters!"

"What kind of monster is it?" Moonbeam asked excitedly.

"Whatever it is," Screwball said, "I'm sure we can take it. I'm good with monsters."

"She really is," Mothball nodded, though he was still nervous.

"Yes!" Mantis yelled. "But this monster was chosen specifically for…"

He was interrupted as something burst out of the ground behind him, sending him and the other soldiers hurdling forward. Everyone gazed up in awe at the giant purple worm with a pink head.

"Whoa!" Moonbeam grinned. "A giant worm!"

The worm looked down at them with its beady black eyes and opened its head to reveal black tendrils coming out of a three-way mouth. Everyone covered their ears as it let out an ear-piercing scream.

"Don't worry, guys," Screwball said as she approached the worm. "I've got this."

"Screwball, no!" Twilight protested. "That's a Tatzlwurm!"

"I don't care what he is. I'm sure he's not that bad."

"How do you know it's a him?" Moonbeam called.

"Intuition." She patted the worm's purple scales. "It's okay, buddy…"

"Screwball!" Twilight shouted again. "Don't get too close!"

High above, the Tatzlwurm sniffed.

"Aw, see?" Screwball said. "He's just cranky 'cuz he has a cold."

"Oh no," Twilight uttered. "Screwy! Get away before he…"

The Tatzlwurm sneezed downwards, covering Screwball in green snot.

"Blech!" she gagged as she tried to wipe the mucus off. "Okay, I admit that was rude, but that doesn't mean…"

She trailed off as her face suddenly became hot and she gripped her stomach as it churned. Mothball gasped as he watched his fiancé turn green, spots appearing all over her body.

"Ugh," she grunted as she started to wobble. "I don't feel so good."

Mothball rushed to her side before she could make contact with the floor.

"You alright?" he asked.

"I feel…sick," Screwball coughed. "But I never get sick!"

"I tried to tell you!" Twilight yelled. "Tatzlwurms carry a virus that is contagious to all magical beings, including chaotic ones!"

"The only creature Chrysalis could find that could incapacitate Discord," Mantis explained. "She especially didn't want him snooping around."

"How'd she even get ahold of a Tatzlwurm, anyway?"

"Well, you know how changelings can manipulate creatures with…"

"Ahem!" Captain Acari coughed. "Shouldn't we concentrate on the beast here?"

As if on cue, the enormous worm screeched in their faces, showing off his tendrils.

"I may be sick," Screwball wheezed, "but I can still…"

She clapped her hooves, but nothing happened.

"It's the sickness!" Twilight exclaimed. "It blocks your magic!"

"Oh, poo," Screwball grunted.

The Tatzlwurm screamed again, demanding to be acknowledged. Mothball levitated Screwball out of the way while Trixie moved in front of Moonbeam.

"Okay," Trixie said. "We've got seven…" She glanced at the sick pony. "Sorry. *Six* magic users here and one giant worm. It shouldn't be too hard."

They jumped as something else emerged from the ground behind them. They turned around to see another Tatzlwurm.

"There are *two* ?!" Twilight hollered.

"What?!" exclaimed Mantis, who was equally surprised. "That's impossible! The queen said there was only one!"

"Looks like he found a mate," Acari observed.

Suddenly, a third worm sprang up besides Screwball and Mothball, this one half the size of the other two. Mothball quickly rolled his fiancée into the far corner.

"And they got busy!" Lieutenant Bombus marveled.

"We're screwed," Trixie murmured.

"Maybe not," Twilight said as the gears in her head went to work. "If we all work together, we can take them out. General, you and I will take the alpha male, Captain Acari and, uh…" She paused at the lieutenant. "I didn't catch your name."

"Lieutenant Bombus, at your service, your highness!" Bombus saluted.

"Okay. You and Captain Acari will take the female. Mothball will handle the baby, and Trixie, you keep Screwball and Moonbeam out of danger."

Normally, Trixie would've objected to being given the babysitting job, but since the task involved protecting her daughter, she was more than happy to oblige.

"Are we agreed, then?" Twilight asked.

Mantis nodded and shook the alicorn's hoof. "Agreed."

"Alright!" Bombus cheered as he slapped Acari on the back. "Go Team Dynamo!"

The captain growled. "Call us that again and you'll be incinerated along with the worms!"

"Focus, you two!" the general commanded. "Move out! Now!"

Twilight and the changelings flew to their perspective Tatzlwurms while Trixie hurried Moonbeam over to where Screwball was huddled. Twilight shot a beam at the alpha male to press him back into the ground.

"You said Chrysalis was able to manipulate him?" she asked the general.

"With mind control, yes," Mantis said as he dodged the tendrils. "I could cast it on him if he'd stay still long enough!"

"Where's Fluttershy and her Stare when you need her?"

Meanwhile, Acari and Bombus were calculating their attack on the female.

"So what do you think?" the lieutenant asked. "You take it from the left and I'll take it from the…?"

"I've got this," the captain grunted as she charged forward.

"Hey!" Bombus called. "What about the whole 'teamwork' thing?"

Acari zapped the Tatzlwurm, who roared in response. She shot out her tendrils with lightning speed and caught the captain. The worm pulled her in while Acari fought against the black coils.

"Hey, back off, lady!" Bombus shouted.

The captain watched in awe as the incompetent lieutenant shot a series of beams at the Tatzlwurm's tendrils. She cried out in agony and released Acari. Bombus smirked at her.

"You were saying?"

"Um," she murmured. "Thanks."

"Ah, well," the lieutenant said as he rubbed the back of his neck. "You know. I have my moments."

"Shut up and help me finish this beast."

"Oh. Right. Gotcha."

In the farthest corner of the castle, Moonbeam and Trixie were tending to Screwball, who was coughing, sneezing, wheezing and shivering. Trixie took off her cape and draped it over the sick pony.

"Thanks," Screwball sniffed. "Though that's oddly out-of-character for you."

"What can I say?" Trixie shrugged. "My compassion's back."

"I like this new you, Mom," Moonbeam said with a smile.

Screwball groaned as she tried to sit up. "I feel so pathetic! I should be helping!"

"You're in no condition to fight," Trixie said as she lay her back down.

"Besides," Moonbeam said, turning to the battle, "it looks like they've

got it under control. And check out Uncle Mothy's moves!"

They watched as Mothball fearlessly faced the smaller Tatzlwurm. He was attempting his mind control spell, but the baby kept wriggling its head out of the way. The only decent shots he could get were to the lower half. After a while, the baby dove back into the ground. Moonbeam cheered and clapped her hooves.

Then it reappeared through the wall behind Mothball, knocking him to the other side of the castle.

"Mothy!" Screwball cried as the smaller Tatzlwurm slithered towards him.

Trixie narrowed her eyes in determination. She was just starting to like her younger brother. She wasn't going to let him get eaten by a giant worm.

"Moonbeam, take care of Screwball for a sec," she commanded. "Mummy's gotta help her brother!"

The filly nodded and stood protectively in front of the sick pony. Trixie didn't feel comfortable leaving her daughter practically unprotected, but she had no other choice. The others were too busy with the parents, and Mothball was barely conscious.

She sprouted wings and flew to her brother's side.

"Hey, ugly!" she shouted, shooting at the baby Tatzlwurm's head.

Unfortunately, all that did was provoke the young monster. It opened its mouth and grabbed Trixie by the neck. The unicorn choked as the coils crushed her throat, cutting off her breath.

Moonbeam gasped when she saw that her mother was about to become worm chow. Without thinking, she raced over to the baby Tatzlwurm and started shooting random beams at it.

"You leave my mommy alone!" she cried.

One beam hit the worm square in the eye, catching its attention. It let go of Trixie and turned to the filly. Moonbeam cowered in fear. It

lashed out its head and smacked her across the room.

"Moonbeam!" Trixie cried.

The filly landed on the floor with a thud. She lifted her head weakly as the baby Tatzlwurm towered over her. It opened its mouth and was about to bring it down on the filly when Trixie slid between them.

A change had come over the unicorn. Her coat was darkening and her eyes were literally blazing with green fire. She growled, showing her pointed teeth.

" *Big* mistake."

Moonbeam screeched as her mother spontaneously combusted into a pillar of green flame, which made everyone, even the Tatzlwurms, turn their heads in shock. Mothball had regained consciousness, and his eyes were widening at the spectacle before him.

They watched as Trixie grew in size, until she was at least fifty feet tall. Her blue coat burned away into black scales, her silky tail hardened into flesh, green spikes sprung up her back, her horn transforming to match them; her neck became long and slender, her muzzle stretched into a mighty snout, bones grew along her translucent wings, the pupils of her eyes shrunk into slits, and toes and claws grew from her hooves.

When the fire faded away, in the place of the unicorn was an enormous, black and green dragon. Every pony and changeling gaped in astonishment.

The Tatzlwurms were confused, but shook it off and roared at the large reptile. Trixie the Dragon responded with a roar of fire breath. Twilight and the changeling soldiers quickly flew out of the flame's path.

The fire had singed the Tatzlwurm family, but Trixie was not done. She lashed out her claws and scraped them all across the middle. They cried out in pain, but Trixie ignored them. She flapped her wings and rose into the air. When she came down, the Tatzlwurms

found themselves beneath her feet.

"No one," she snarled in a deep voice, "I repeat! *No one* hurts my daughter! Got that?!"

The Tatzlwurms whimpered like puppies.

"Good!"

She lifted her feet and the giant worms slithered back into their holes.

"And don't come back!" the dragon snorted, smoke coming out of her nostrils.

Green flames engulfed Trixie again, though not as elaborately as before. This time, she took her changeling form. She glanced around at all the flabbergasted faces.

"What's everyone looking at Trixie for?"

"M-Mom?" Moonbeam uttered.

Trixie turned to face her daughter, and frowned to see that she was just as confused as the others.

"Honey? What are you…?"

Then Trixie caught sight of her back and noticed her green shell and wings. She stared down at the rest of her body.

"When…did I…?" she stammered. "What just happened?"

Moonbeam jumped up and exclaimed, "You turned into a mega, fire-breathing dragon! And it was *awesome* !"

"No kidding!" Bombus cheered. "I've never seen a changeling turn into a full-grown *dragon* before!"

"That's because no changeling has ever succeeded in doing so," Mantis explained, still in a daze. "And that truly was…remarkable!"

"Eh," Acari shrugged. "It was alright."

"B-but," Trixie stuttered. "I've never done anything like that before! Never! I can barely change into anything outside of a pony!"

Mothball, who had risen from his place, approached his sister with a smile. "Maybe you just needed the right motivation."

Trixie turned to her daughter, who had her hooves wrapped around her foreleg.

"It was incredible!" Moonbeam piped. "You're the coolest mom in the whole wide world!"

"You've certainly grown, your highness," Mantis complimented.

"Well," Trixie chuckled as she brushed her mane to the side. "The Great and Powerful Trixie practices."

"No. You've grown in height."

Trixie glanced down at her long legs and then around her, only now noticing that she was a few inches taller than Twilight.

"It's taken a while," the general said, "but it seems you've reached your full potential." He bowed his head. "You are truly the next ruler of the changelings."

Acari and Bombus bowed too, which made Trixie blush.

A groan from Screwball interrupted the moment. Mothball rushed to her side.

"We have to get her out of here," he said.

"We have to get back to the hive," Mantis argued as he levitated the box containing Chrysalis' heart.

"But Screwy's sick!"

"And so is the queen!"

"We won't be able to make it to either places quick enough," Twilight said. "We're too far away, and my magic can't teleport all of us, and

Screwball's too weak."

Screwball lifted her heavy eyelids and called out in a raspy voice, "Dad…help."

Instantly, Discord materialized at her side.

"What happened?! Screwy?! Oh my gosh! You're green!"

"Tatzlwurm," Screwball grumbled.

"Tatzlwurm?!" He glared at Mothball. "Why was she around a Tatzlwurm?!" He turned and finally noticed the group of changelings. "And who are these guys?"

"No time to explain," Twilight said. "First we need to get Screwball taken care of."

"Of course," Discord said as he gently took his daughter in his arms. "Come on, sweetie. We're going home."

He teleported them all to Screwball's room in the Castle of Chaos.

"Fluttershy!" he called as he set Screwball in bed. "Come quick!"

Fluttershy fluttered into the room and gasped. "Screwy! What happened?"

"Tatzlwurm flu."

"Tatzlwurm flu?!"

"Long story," Screwball coughed.

"Oh, you poor thing. I'll get you some…" She paused when she saw the changelings. "I'm sorry. We weren't properly introduced."

"These are soldiers from the hive," Mothball said, gesturing to the three changelings. "And this," he grinned at Trixie, "is my big sister."

"You know me better in this form," she said as she took her pony form.

"Trixie!" Fluttershy exclaimed, rushing to give the unicorn a hug. "It's so great to see you! Screwy told me who you really were." She glanced down at Moonbeam. "Is this your daughter? She's adorable, but…why is she disguised like that?"

"Her dad's Iron Will," Screwball grunted.

The pegasus' eyes widened at Trixie. "The *Incredible* Iron Will? The minotaur?"

"Hey, don't judge Trixie," the unicorn said, pointing at Discord. "*Your* taste in mates isn't exactly orthodox either."

"While I'm interested to hear this story as well," said Mantis, "we must get the princess back to the hive at once."

"Discord, can you teleport us there?" Twilight asked.

The draconequus turned to the changeling soldiers. "Only if you let me come too."

Mantis shook his head. "That is out of the…"

"I'm *coming* ." He turned back to his daughter. "You just rest now, sweetie. Daddy will be right back."

Screwball grinned. "Thanks, Daddy. Gee, I guess I might still need you after all."

Discord returned her smile. "I'd kiss you on the forehead, but you know."

"Get better soon," Mothball said, taking his fiancée's hoof.

"I'll take care of her," Fluttershy assured them. "You boys go ahead."

Discord nodded and raised his claw. With a snap of his fingers, he, the changelings and Twilight were transported to the hive, startling several changelings.

A nurse changeling rushed out of the queen's chamber. "General Mantis! Thank the heavens you're back!"

"We have the princess," Mantis declared, "and the queen's heart. How is she?"

The nurse's face grew grim. "She's fading fast. If it wasn't for the heart in there, you would've already been too late."

Well, it couldn't have been just any monster. Otherwise, Screwy would've taken it out in a jiff. Then I realized one Tatzlwurm wouldn't have been hard enough for six beings with magic.

We're almost at the end. Just a few more chapters, and they are going to require a lot of attention.

As One Door Closes

WARNING: You might need Kleenex for this.

There was an unsettling quiet when they entered the queen's bedchamber, as if not even a single breath was being drawn. The room was a lot more crowded than the last time Mothball, Discord or Mantis had entered. The nurse changelings were tending to their queen, determined to make her last few moments in this world comfortable: adjusting her pillows, laying a cloth on her head and laying extra blankets over her body. Her eyes were staring blankly up at the canopy of her bed.

Even Twilight, whose life had been almost ruined by this creature many times, was disturbed by the sight.

"My queen," Mantis said, approaching the bed with the ivory chest hovering in front of him, "I've brought your heart, and more."

He gestured for Trixie to come. She gulped and slowly trotted to her mother's side, her stomach churning at her thin, pale figure. Chrysalis squinted at her.

"Who are you?" she asked in a weak whisper.

Trixie glanced down and realized she was still in her pony form and changed back to her true self.

"Bellatrix? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mother," Trixie said with a nod. "But I go by 'Trixie' now. I've… come to succeed you."

Chrysalis snorted. "I didn't think they'd find you, or that you would come back, after what happened last we met." She carefully looked her over. "You've changed. Not just your height, but something about you is…" She sighed. "You got your heart back too, didn't

you?"

"We ran into her and the others at the old castle," Mantis explained.

"Others?"

She rolled her head over and finally noticed Mothball, Discord and Twilight. She couldn't help but smirk.

"How charming. Two of my greatest enemies have come to see me off. Pity the other princesses and those Element bearers aren't here too. It'd be like a little reunion!"

Twilight looked up at Discord and whispered, "I swear, if she wasn't dying…"

"I know, right?" the draconequus murmured.

"So this is my grandma?" Moonbeam said, putting her front hooves on the bed.

Chrysalis glanced down at her in confusion. "Grandma?"

"My daughter, Moonbeam" Trixie explained, placing a hoof on the filly's shoulder.

"I see. Well, looks like you've got the job of producing an heir covered, though you'll have to help her improve her transformations. She looks like a pony mixed with a cow!"

"Actually, she was sort of…born this way."

The queen's eyes widened. "What in the world did you sleep with?"

"That is not important, Mother," Trixie said between her teeth. "However, now that I am going to be Queen, there is something I've wanted to tell you for a long time."

She leaned forward and whispered harshly, "I…am not… *you* ."

Chrysalis sighed. "No. No, you're not."

She winced as she felt a rush of pain in her chest.

"Here," she said, pulling her daughter close so their horns were touching. "It's time."

The queen's horn glowed and sent a spark to Trixie's. The changeling princess jumped as she felt the jolt of electricity.

"Now let me give you one last bit of advice. Remember all those things I taught you about being a ruler?"

Trixie nodded.

"Don't listen to any of them."

The princess was unsure of how to respond to that. Chrysalis released her daughter and looked around the room.

"Well, I have nothing more to say. Anyone else?"

Everyone was silent. Trixie and Discord were particularly surprised that they had nothing left to say to the dying queen. Mothball glanced at General Mantis, who had a seemingly emotionless expression, but he could clearly see the pain and sadness locked away in his eyes. The prince nudged the general forward. Mantis looked at him in confusion, only for Mothball to wave his hoof towards his mother.

Mantis glanced down at Chrysalis and gulped. "I, um, have something to say."

The queen turned her attention entirely to the general. He took a deep breath.

"My…Chrysalis, I just want you to know that…well, I suppose you already know, but I'd just like to say that…being in your service…is the only thing that's kept me going and…" He hung his head. "I don't know what I'm going to do once you're gone."

She gazed up at him, her eyes not giving any sign of emotion.

"Do it," she whispered.

His head shot up. "What?"

She put her hoof to her chest. "My heart. Now."

Mantis nodded and opened the ivory box, levitating the faded green heart out of it. He squinted inside the box and his eyes widened.

"My queen, what is…?"

"Just do it!" Chrysalis barked.

"I…don't know how to…"

"Let me try," Discord volunteered, snapping his fingers.

The heart vanished and Chrysalis sat up, wailing in pain. The nurse changelings gripped one of her forelegs, the royal children and the general grabbing the other. She shook the nurses off so she could grip her chest. Her eyes shut tight as she gritted her teeth.

Memories came rushing back: the births of her two royal children, the training sessions she had shared with them, the long personal talks she had shared with Mantis, all memories made without her heart.

She had never given much thought to these moments before, but now they were richer, more vibrant, and the recollection of them brought tears to her eyes.

Once she had calmed down, she looked at Trixie and Mothball and said, "Children?"

The two royals were alarmed at the tears streaming on either side of their mother's odd smile.

"You're…" she sniffed, "you're so…grown-up and…so beautiful."

"Are you alright, Mother?" Mothball dared to ask.

She surprised them even further by throwing her hooves around them both.

"Yes, my children!" she cried, squeezing them tight. "In fact, I've never felt better in my life!"

She released them and glanced down at Moonbeam. "And my granddaughter…" She ruffled her mane. "You're so beautiful too!" She gestured to the entire room of changelings. "You're *all* beautiful!"

"I didn't think she'd get *this* sappy," Trixie whispered to her brother. "Then again, she's been without a heart longer than me."

The queen frowned when she met Discord's gaze.

"Discord," she said slowly. "Now that I have my emotions back, it's come to my attention that any feelings I had for you…have diminished."

Discord snorted. "Well…would've been nice if you figured that out *before* you removed your heart and went on a vengeful rampage."

Chrysalis rolled her eyes. "I know, right? All that did was make me a power-crazed tyrant with no sympathy towards…"

Then she suddenly coughed and fell back onto her mattress. One of the nurses checked her pulse, now that she had one to check.

"She has a pulse," the nurse said, "but it's slowing. The sickness has reached her heart."

"So," Chrysalis heaved, "I was right." She winced. "It won't be long now." She turned to Twilight. "Twilight, I know we've had our differences in the past, but do you think we can let bygones be bygones?"

There was nothing else the alicorn could say to the dying queen, except, "Sure."

"Good." She rolled her head over to Trixie and Mothball. "Children… forgive me. I was denied happiness in my childhood, and thus denied it to everyone around me, even you. But…it seems you've found happiness on your own. I hope it stays that way." She lifted her hoof to stroke Mothball's cheek and then Trixie's. "That way, your lives will be better than mine was."

"Wow," the prince said, tears forming in his eyes. "That's…the most

supportive thing you've ever said to me."

"Ditto," Trixie choked.

"Sorry I won't be able to make it to your wedding, Mothball," Chrysalis said. "And Bellatrix…Trixie, I'm sure you will make a splendid queen."

Moonbeam sneezed and switched to her changeling form, which made the queen raise her eyebrow.

"And please," she said, "help your daughter control that."

Trixie shrugged. "Fair enough."

The queen sighed. "I was a terrible mother, wasn't I?"

Mothball opened his mouth, but Trixie answered for him. "Yeah, you pretty much were."

"Yes," Chrysalis agreed. "But you should know, even in my heartless state, you both were important to me. It's hard to believe, I know…"

"Actually," Trixie said, glancing at Moonbeam, "I know exactly what you mean."

The queen smiled softly. "I love you both. You deserve to hear it at least once from me."

"Mother…" Mothball said as he touched her hoof.

Chrysalis gasped and clenched her hooves. Her breaths were now short and barely audible. She tiredly lifted her eyes towards the general, raising her hoof to cup his chin.

"Mantis…" she heaved.

She drew his face to hers and lightly brushed her lips against his.

"If only…"

Her eyes closed and her hoof gently fell from the general's face. After a long, shaky breath, her body went still. One of the nurses

checked her pulse and hung her head solemnly.

The changelings fell to their knees and bowed their heads, the soldiers removing their helmets. Even Twilight and Discord lowered their heads in respect. Mothball held his mother's lifeless hoof, while Trixie embraced her daughter as unexpected tears fell down her cheeks. Mantis gently stroked the queen's brittle hair and closed his eyes. Even now, he refused to show his emotions in front of her.

He looked up as a hoof touched his shoulder. He turned to Captain Acari, who tilted her head towards the queen's body. The general nodded and put his helmet back on. His horn illuminated, its green aura enveloping the queen's body. The rest of the soldiers did the same, and together they lifted the corpse from the bed.

They positioned themselves on either side of their queen, Mantis in the lead, and carried her out the door. The others followed, the royal children and Moonbeam first, then Discord and Twilight, then the rest of the changelings present.

When they emerged from the bedchamber, there were many gasps throughout the hive. Slowly and solemnly, the procession moved across the hive to a staircase leading underground. Many other changelings joined them.

In the lowest part of the hive was a grand tomb, with the corpses of past changeling queens preserved in crystalized mucus. The soldiers laid Chrysalis' body on the nearest empty stone altar. The soldiers stepped back, except for Mantis, who started speaking in a strange tongue that sounded like bees buzzing.

"What's he saying?" Moonbeam whispered to her mother.

Trixie replied, "He's saying, 'We are gathered here to honor our dearly departed queen. Although she is no longer with us, the memory of her shall always be preserved not just in crystal, but in us all. May she be rewarded in the next life, and that she may finally be at peace.'"

Discord snapped his fingers and conjured a green rose. Everyone watched him curiously as he approached Chrysalis' body and placed

it in her hooves.

"Farewell," he whispered, "old friend."

As the royals went to say their goodbyes, Mantis took out the ivory chest that had held the queen's heart and opened it. Inside was a small book, which he had noticed earlier but hadn't gotten the chance to ask about. He opened it to see yellowed pages written in ink, each entry dated. After reading a few lines, he realized it was the queen's diary and stopped, for he felt he was invading her privacy. Then he noticed a slight bump in the pages. He quickly turned them over and his eyes widened when he got to the middle.

There, pressed between the pages, was a blue cornflower.

There was a caption below: *Mantis gave this to me today. Perhaps the last bit of joy I'll ever feel.*

He levitated the cornflower from the book and gazed at it in disbelief. He had given this to her the day she had removed her heart, and she had kept it all these centuries.

The general then looked at the body of the queen and approached it, laying the flower alongside the green rose.

"Rest well, my queen," he whispered.

Discord glanced at the flower and then at the general. "You cared about her a lot, didn't you?"

Mantis looked up at the draconequus. "She may have loved you, Discord, but you didn't know her like I did." He hung his head and sighed. "No one did."

"General," Captain Acari said. "We're ready."

Mantis nodded and backed away from the corpse. He closed his eyes as he, the royal children and the other changelings illuminated their horns. Crystalized mucus surrounded the queen and slowly enveloped her body. Everyone watched as she was wrapped into a chrysalis, her body visible through the mucus for all to see.

The changelings' horns diminished and they all lowered their heads for one last moment of silence. Then the crowd started to depart.

"Where's everyone going?" Twilight asked.

"Our queen is dead," Captain Acari replied. "It's time to crown our new queen." She turned to Trixie. "You coming, your highness?"

"I, uh," she stammered, staring at the body of her mother. "I'll be there in a minute."

Acari looked to her general, who nodded in approval. Discord and Twilight followed the others out. Mothball placed Moonbeam on his back and joined them. Mantis, however, looked back at the princess, who was staring at the cocoon. He walked up and sat beside her.

"It's funny," she murmured. "I was never fond of Mother, but I can't help but feel sorry for her. She never was truly happy, was she?"

Mantis shook his head. "No. She could've been, though, if she had just allowed time for her aching heart to heal."

"I never quite understood your feelings for her."

He sighed. "It never really was a secret, was it?"

"Don't get me wrong. You do a really good job hiding your emotions, but they're still there. Still, why her? I mean…you knew she could never feel the same way."

He lifted his hoof and caressed the cocoon's surface. "You didn't know her, when she was still herself. She was a young, frightened princess who was unsure of what she wanted. She was told her destiny was to take the throne and one day rule Equestria, but every time I saw her, I knew she wanted more.

"Do you know why she was so interested in Discord? Because he was the first creature ever to treat her as an equal, and the thought gave her pleasure. She told me so herself. She developed such an obsession, which she called love. When that love was shattered, instead of waiting for her emotions to stabilize, she eradicated them. That only made things worse."

"Yeah," Trixie heaved. "No kidding."

The general lowered his hoof and raised his head in determination. "But I'm not going to make the same mistake."

"What do you mean?"

He turned to her. "My sole purpose in life was serving your mother. When I discovered her life was ending, I thought mine was ending too. But I am not going to give up on myself just because my love is gone. I have already lived longer than what is average for a changeling. I have a few years, maybe less. However many years I have left, I'm going to spend them making sure you start your new reign on the right track."

She blinked. "You'd do that?"

"The love of my life is gone. What better way to live out the rest of my days than to look after her daughter?"

Trixie hung her head. "Trixie hasn't been Bellatrix for such a long time. She's not even so sure she'll make a good ruler."

"Trixie? Bellatrix? Does it matter what you call yourself?"

She lifted her head and stared at the general. After one last glance at her mother, she said:

"Lead on, General."

They flew up to the main foyer where all the changelings were hovering above, a path to the throne cleared for their new queen. Mothball, Moonbeam, Discord and Twilight were standing on either side of the large seat, waiting for her.

Mantis put a hoof on Trixie's shoulder and nodded. She took a deep breath and proceeded to the throne. As she flew by, the changelings bowed their heads. She had forgotten how good it felt to have respect from others. She had been a queen once before. This time, she was going to do it right.

When she reached the throne, Mothball gave her a wink and

Moonbeam waved. Trixie smiled and turned to face the crowd. Mantis took Chrysalis' old crown from one of the soldiers and held it out for the princess. Trixie lowered her head so he could place it on her, just as he had done for her mother over a millennium ago.

"Long live Queen Bellatrix Insectra…" Mantis announced.

"Please," Trixie said, holding out her hoof. "Just Queen Trixie is fine."

The general raised an eyebrow, but started over. "Long live…Queen Trixie!"

As Trixie rose to her full height, the changelings and guests cheered. The new queen took her place on the throne. After a few minutes of applause, Trixie held up her hoof to silence them.

"Fellow changelings," she said, "as your new queen, Trix—" She paused. " *My* first order of business will be to grant you all what you have been denied. From what I have experienced, and what I have witnessed from my mother, it has come to my attention that although emotions can make us suffer and lead us to do things we regret, we simply cannot exist without them. We fear so that we may avoid danger, we anger so that we may stand up for ourselves and those we care about, we regret so that we may learn from the mistakes made by others and ourselves, and we love so that we can make a difference in someone else's life.

"If these emotions are imbalanced, we may create a void in ourselves, and we spend years trying to fill that void, but all in vain. Our emotions can lead us astray, and we can get hurt along the way, but if we take the time to balance them out, we can become even stronger. No creature must ever have to suffer like my mother did, and no one ever shall again."

She turned to the draconequus. "Discord, do you think you can do me a favor?"

Discord shrugged. "Depends on what it is."

She gestured him to come closer and whispered in his ear. His eyes

widened.

"Well, I could try, but…you sure that's a good idea?"

Trixie glanced at the general, who instantly understood her intentions and nodded.

"Do it," she told the draconequus.

Discord sighed and raised his claw. "Very well, but you might want earplugs."

He snapped his fingers and all the changelings, the royals and the general excluded, cried out in agony. Many gripped their chests, some collapsed to the floor in shock, and others cradled their heads.

"What'd you do?" Mothball asked.

Trixie smiled. "I filled the void."

"You mean you…?"

She nodded. "No creature should ever be without a heart."

Lieutenant Bombus looked up at the queen. "What's happening? Why do I feel…?" He sniffed. "Why do I *feel* ?!"

As the changelings started to recover, some of them were breaking out in tears. Others took one look at each other and embraced. In no time at all, the hive was echoing with happy sobs. Captain Acari caught sight of Bombus and blushed.

"Oh, uh, Bombus…" she smiled, rubbing the back of her neck. "About you saving me earlier, I never realized you were so…"

He interrupted her with a sudden wail and rushed to the general, throwing his hooves around his neck.

"General!" he whined. "I just want you to know that…you're like the father I've never had! And that's really important to me, 'cuz, you know, none of us have any fathers! I love you, man!"

Mantis scowled at the queen. "Change them back."

The royals, Discord and Twilight burst into laughter.

"I'm serious."

Twilight smiled up at Trixie. "I guess we made the right choice in coming to find you."

"Indeed, Twilight," the new queen said as she watched her subjects rejoice in their new emotional state. "Things are going to be very different around here."

Wow. I think that's my first real death in these fanfics. I didn't think I'd feel bad about Chrysalis' death, but it had to be done. Seems appropriate that I write this, since I just attended a funeral last week. I was originally going to have General Mantis die with her, but then realized that might weaken his character.

Well, Trixie is now Queen, and the reason she's been speaking less and less in the third-person, is because she's been gaining a better sense of herself. But we're not done yet. There's one loose end that still needs tying.

Another One Opens

Okay, smart alecks, that IS the title.

Two months after Trixie's coronation, Mothball was awakened by water splashing on his face.

"Gah!" he screamed, sitting up in bed. "Don't kill me, Mr. Discord! I didn't mean to call you 'Dad!'"

The room erupted with laughter. Mothball shook himself to his senses to see who had awoken him. His bedroom had been invaded by changelings. Standing on his left was Cinnamon Stick and hovering above him was Thunder Dash with an empty bucket.

"Rise and shine, Lover Boy!" the pegasus cackled. "It's time for your surprise bachelor party!"

Mothball groaned as he squeezed the water out of his mane. "What'd you guys do, invite the entire hive?"

"Only the ones General Mantis would allow off-duty!" Lieutenant Bombus exclaimed. "All the females are at the bachelorette party with the queen. With love hunts no longer being necessary for our survival, we have nothing better to do."

"Face it, dude," Cinnamon Stick said with a shrug. "Who else were we going to invite?"

"Yeah, three guys is hardly a party," Thunder declared.

"Wait until you see what we have in store for you tonight!"

"Uh-oh," Mothball said worriedly. "You didn't hire any hookers or strippers, did you?"

"You know, I think Queen Chrysalis had something to do with that tradition," Bombus said, tapping his chin.

"Of course not," Thunder assured the prince. "I'm a married stallion now, remember? Blossom wouldn't let me hear the end of it!"

"And we can't get drunk either," Cinnamon Stick added, "since Thunder and I and about a quarter of the changelings here aren't old enough."

"Trust us. What we have planned is totally legal, but not dull!"

Mothball shrieked as he was grabbed by the hooves and lifted into the air.

"Mothball!" the stallions and changelings chanted as they carried him out the door. "Mothball! Mothball!"

"Guys!" the prince whispered harshly. "You'll wake the others!"

They whispered the rest of the way: "Mothball, Mothball."

"So you gonna tell me why I had to give Dinky and Apple Blossom wings?" Screwball asked Lightning Dash.

"Whee, I'm an alicorn!" Dinky cried as she twirled through the air. "My dream to be a princess has become a reality!"

"Whoa, nelly!" Apple Blossom exclaimed as she fluttered her new wings. "Wait until Thunder gets a load of me!"

"Once we get to the location for your bachelorette party," Lightning explained, "you'll see that it was worth it."

"You didn't do anything stupid like hire a stripper, did you?" Screwball asked.

"I think my mother started that trend," said Trixie.

The four best friends were flying through the night sky, accompanied by the new changeling queen and a great number of female changelings.

"Nah," Apple Blossom said, waving her hoof. "We're not *that* kind of crazy! Besides, I'm a married mare."

"Believe me," said Lightning. "This is gonna be even better!"

"Hey, Lightning," Screwball said as she glanced around at the group. "I thought you'd be bringing Apple Tart."

"I forget," Dinky said, scratching her head. "Is this the Apple Tart from Manehattan or the one from Vanhoover?"

"Manehattan," Lightning replied.

"Oh, right! I was confused 'cuz the one from Vanhoover's a stallion."

"That's what happens when ya keep namin' yerr foals after apples," Apple Blossom shrugged. "Eventually, every pony ends up with the same name."

"Yeah," the pegasus sighed. "That didn't really work out. She wasn't up for our kind of relationship."

"What does that mean?" Screwball asked. "The fact that you're both mares, or that you live in different cities?"

"No. It was more like the fact that I'm a pegasus and she's an earth pony."

"Ooh!" Dinky winced.

"That's just not right!" Screwball exclaimed.

"I can't believe she's related to me!" Apple Blossom scowled.

"Oh, it wasn't that she was prejudiced or anything," Lightning explained. "She just didn't like the fact that I could fly and she couldn't. I guess she was sort of jealous."

"That's dumb! Thunder and I never let a silly thing like that come between us!"

Lightning shrugged. "Guess we didn't care about each other as

much. Funny. It was never a problem for Aquafresh. She liked watching me fly."

"What happened between you guys anyway?" Screwball inquired.

"She didn't like you, remember?"

"Oh, right."

"I mean what's the point in having a marefriend if she can't get along with my best friends?"

"Hey, I don't care if your marefriend hates me. You seemed really happy with Aquafresh."

"I was, but… Aw, it doesn't matter. I've got you guys to make me happy."

She put her hooves around her three best friends.

"You know," Trixie whispered, "if you're looking for a rebound, I know a few female changelings who'd be up for that sort of thing."

Lightning cringed. "Thanks, but I think I'm gonna take a little break before getting back in the field again."

"Hey, we're here!" Dinky announced.

Screwball looked ahead to see that they were approaching a large cloud stadium.

"Surprise!" Lightning cried. "We booked the air hockey rink so we could have it all to ourselves and play until sunrise!"

Screwball smiled. "Aw, thanks you guys! This is an awesome idea! Now I see why I had to make those wings."

"Thunder was always talkin' about how much fun air hockey was," said Apple Blossom. "Now's my chance to play!"

"Me too!" Dinky piped.

"Trust me," Lighting said. "It's much more fun than on the ground."

When they entered the stadium, however, it was already full of changelings. Male changelings, to be precise. Playing on the air field were Thunder Dash and Mothball, Cinnamon Stick cheering with the changelings in the bleachers.

"Hey, what's going on?!" Lightning demanded.

Every male turned to the females.

"Lightning?" Thunder said. "What are you gals doing here?" His eyes widened when he noticed his wife. "Blossom, are those wings?"

Apple Blossom blushed as she fluttered her yellow wings. "Ya like 'em?"

"Like 'em? You look…"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Lightning snorted. "We booked this stadium for our bachelorette party. What are *you* guys doing here?"

"We book this stadium for our *bachelor* party!"

"What?! Thunder, I told you we were having our party here!"

"No, you suggested we'd have *our* party here!"

"Well, we can't *both* have our parties here!"

"Why not?" Screwball said.

Lightning raised an eyebrow. "Why not? 'Cuz it would ruin the whole concept! *That's* why not! A bachelorette party is supposed to celebrate a mare's last night of being single! You can't spend that with your husband-to-be!"

"Again, why not? It's his last night of being single too. Why can't we celebrate being single together?"

The ponies glanced at each other. Cinnamon Stick shrugged.

"Well, we're all here."

"Yeah," Screwball said with a sinister smile. "What do you say, girls? You up for a battle of the sexes?"

"But the game's supposed to be played with two!" Thunder insisted.

The chaotic pony clapped her hooves and a hockey stick appeared in everyone's hoof. "I think we can change the rules a bit."

"I'd join you guys," Cinnamon Stick said, "but the spell Mothball cast only makes me walk on clouds and…"

He stared down at the abyss below the hockey field.

"No problem," Screwball said as her tail snapped.

Instantly, brown wings materialized on Cinnamon Stick's back.

"Cool!" Dinky chimed as she rushed to hug her coltfriend. "Now we match!"

Thunder looked slyly at Apple Blossom and whispered, "Say, you think Screwy will let you keep those wings a little longer?"

His wife giggled. "Only if you promise to take a moonlight flight with me."

Screwball smirked at her fiancé. "Ready to get beaten?"

Mothball smiled. "Not a chance!"

"Then bring it on, Lover Boy!"

As the ponies and changelings got into their positions, Bombus elbowed Mothball. "You picked yourself a feisty one, your highness."

"Yeah," Mothball sighed with a grin. "How'd I get so lucky?"

The next day, the Everfree Forest was filled with more ponies than ever before, for the wedding was to take place at the chocolate lake, where Screwball and Mothball first met. Discord had put up a protective bubble so no rogue creatures would interrupt the

ceremony. Twilight, who was serving as the officiant, was putting the finishing touches on the wedding arch, which was entangled in vines of pink, purple and green roses. Applejack and Spike were setting up the food table; the Pies were hanging up decorations on the trees, while Rainbow Dash and Soarin helped guests to their seats.

Two white tents were set up where the bride and groom were getting ready. In the bride's tent, Rarity and Fluttershy were helping Screwball into her gown. It was the traditional white, with a pink veil and purple lollipops stitched along the skirt and collar. The three bridesmaids, Dinky, Lightning Dash and Apple Blossom were changing into their own gowns while the already-dressed Trixie, who was Mothball's best mare, was grooming Moonbeam, the flower filly.

When Screwball was dressed, everyone gaped in awe.

"Oh, Screwy…" Fluttershy sniffed.

"You're so grown up," Rarity said, tears developing in her eyes.

"Wait until Mothy sees you!" Dinky piped, slapping her best friend on the back.

"My brother sure is lucky," Trixie smirked, "new sis-in-law."

"You're gonna be my aunt!" Moonbeam cheered, jumping up and down. "You're gonna be my aunt!"

"We're not done yet," Rarity declared. "I still need to curl your mane and tail. Where are my curlers? Oh, they're in my saddlebag! I left it on my seat so I could save it!"

"I'll get it for you, Aunt Rarity," Lightning volunteered.

The pegasus flew out of the tent and over to the wicker chairs. She spotted Rarity's saddlebag in the front row. Just as she was picking it up, her plum eyes met a pair of dark red ones. They belonged to a white unicorn mare with a red, white and blue striped mane and a squirt of toothpaste of the same colors for a cutie mark.

"Aqua?" Lightning said after a long period of awkward silence. "What are you doing here?"

"You invited me," Aquafresh said, scrunching her nose. "Remember?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yeah, you did. You sent me a personal invite in the mail just this morning."

"But I didn't…" Lightning paused and smacked herself in the forehead. "Screwy!"

Aquafresh groaned. "I should've known. It's not like you to send something in the mail. You usually just come up and talk to me."

"I'm sorry, Aqua, but Screwy seems to have it in her head that…well, that we're meant for each other."

They both blushed and looked down at their hooves.

"Weird, huh?" Lightning chuckled.

"Yeah," Aquafresh laughed awkwardly. "Especially since the reason we broke up is because…"

"…you don't like her, I know. It's just…you know Screwy's more than just my friend, right? We've known each other since we were in diapers. She's practically family. And if my marefriend and family can't get along…"

"Yeah, I know."

There was another long pause, until Aquafresh looked up and spoke:

"Hey, I…I've missed you."

Lightning met her eyes. "Yeah, me too."

The unicorn bit her lip. "I mean…despite our little disagreements, we had a lot of fun together. Remember our fifth date?"

"The paintball match?"

"And how we were all covered in paint?"

Lightning snickered. "And how I looked more like my mom than ever?"

"So did I! And then we said…"

"Darn, now we're related!" they finished together.

They laughed and caught each other's eyes again.

"Yeah," Aquafresh grinned. "I miss those little moments."

"Well," Lightning said as she circled her hoof in the dirt. "We don't have to be a couple again, but…can we at least be friends?"

The unicorn nodded. "Yeah, that sounds good."

The pegasus held out her hoof. "Friends?"

Aquafresh shook it. "Friends."

"That's what *we* said!" Lyra and Bon-Bon snickered as they passed by, causing the two young mares to blush.

"I, uh…" Lightning stammered as she picked up Rarity's bag. "I gotta get this to my Aunt Rarity, so she can do Screwy's hair."

"Right," Aquafresh said with an awkward grin. "I guess I'll…catch ya later?"

"Yeah. See ya."

The pegasus zoomed back to the bridal tent before things could get weirder.

"What took you so long?" Apple Blossom asked.

"Sorry," Lightning said as she handed Rarity her bag. "Lost track of time."

Screwball smirked at her friend. "Now what are *you* so happy about?"

"Huh?"

"You're blushin' like crazy!" Apple Blossom giggled.

Lightning glanced in the mirror and her cheeks became even redder, making every pony giggle harder.

"It's nothing!" she insisted. "I'm just…really happy for my best friend, that's all!"

"Right," Screwball snickered. "And you didn't just happen to run into a certain unicorn with a highly hygienic smile?"

Lightning scowled. "We'll talk about *that* later!"

"Are you done messing with my mane, Mom?" Moonbeam whined. "You're pulling too hard!"

"I'm done, alright?" Trixie said. "At least I'm not making you wear those awful pants anymore. Stay here while I go check on the groom, okay?"

But as soon as she lifted the flap of the tent, an amazing sight left her frozen in place.

His back was to her, but she could recognize that tall, muscular creature anywhere, even if his hair had gone gray. When he turned, his yellow eyes widened.

"Trixie?" Iron Will gasped. "Is…is that you?"

She glanced down at herself, remembering that she was in her changeling form, as she often was these days.

"Yeah," she said as she took her pony form. "It's me. And…it's actually *Queen* Trixie now."

He blinked. "Huh?"

"I didn't get a chance to tell you. I'm not just a changeling. I'm royal. I only just assumed the changeling throne a couple months ago. But…what are you doing here?"

Fluttershy emerged from the tent to see why Trixie wasn't moving and smiled. "Oh, Iron Will. Nice to see you could make it."

Trixie glanced at the pegasus in shock. "You mean you…?"

"He and I go way back. I told him you'd be here. He has something to say."

"I do," Iron Will said as he fiddled with his tie. "I…I haven't stopped thinking about you over the last…what's it been? Ten years? I…I overreacted when you…well, it took me five seconds after you left to realize how stupid I'd been. If you really were trying to drain me, you wouldn't have told me. But when I went after you, you had already gone."

He sighed. "I've felt guilty ever since. You relied on me with your biggest secret and I let you down. I know it's too late to fix things, but…"

"Mom, what's going on?"

Iron Will froze as a filly with yellow eyes and a gray horn came out of the tent. She looked up at the minotaur in curiosity.

"Who's this?"

Trixie took a deep breath. "Moonbeam, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

Fluttershy grinned and went back inside to give the three some privacy.

Meanwhile, in the groom's tent, Discord was giving Mothball a hard talk.

"And if she asks you to do anything, *anything* at all, you do it! You know why?" He said the rest in a whisper. "Because no matter how much you kid yourself, *she's* in charge."

Thunder Dash shrugged. "It's true."

"Yup," Cinnamon Stick nodded. "And Dinky and I aren't even married yet."

"I think I can handle it," Mothball said.

"Seriously though," Discord said, giving the changeling a warning look. "I'm giving you my greatest treasure, and you better take care of her, you hear?"

"Chill out, Uncle Discord," Cinnamon Stick said. "He *did* give up a crown for her after all."

"I know, but *someone's* gotta say it."

"Daddy!" Zany wined as he fiddled with his bowtie. "Why do I have to wear this?"

Discord smiled as he patted his son on the head. "Because your big sister is getting married and as unfair as it is, you have to look presentable when carrying her rings."

"But this suit is itchy!"

"Tell you what. I'll make you a deal. If you be good until the wedding is over, you can mess that suit up however you like!"

The foal grinned mischievously. "Can I mess Twinkle's dress too?"

Discord hesitated. "Sure."

"I heard that, Discord!"

The draconequus grinned cheekily at the purple alicorn standing in the entrance.

"Whatever do you mean, Twilight?"

The princess rolled her eyes. "Never mind. I just came to tell you that we're just about ready to start. Boys, you should get to your places and Discord, you need to get Screwball."

Mothball gulped. "Well, here it goes."

"Chicken out now, and you die," Discord whispered to the changeling as he exited the tent.

He got an unexpected smile in response. "Whatever you say, sir."

The draconequus stood stunned as he watched the young prince head toward the wedding arch. Then he grinned in satisfaction.

"He's learning," he muttered to himself.

When Discord lifted the flap of the bridal tent, his breath was taken away by the sight before him. Rarity had just taken the curlers out of Screwball's mane, making it look curlier than ever. When she turned around, she had never looked more mature, or beautiful.

Discord sniffed as he wiped away a tear. "My little girl…"

"Dad!" Screwball moaned, though she couldn't help smiling a bit.

"Is it that time already?" Rarity asked. "Oh, we better get to our places, girls."

As Rarity and the bridesmaids exited the tent, Fluttershy gave Discord and Screwball each a peck on the cheek.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Could you, um," Discord stammered, "give us a moment?"

Fluttershy smiled. "Of course. I'll go make sure Zany hasn't undone his tie again."

She flew out of the tent, leaving the father and daughter to have their moment.

"Oh, sweetie," Discord sighed as he brushed a curl out of his little girl's face. "You're almost as beautiful as your mother!"

Screwball raised an eyebrow. "Almost?"

"Oh, come on! You're never going to get me to admit that any pony is lovelier than your mother!"

She giggled. "Fair enough."

He sniffed again. "Now, listen here, Screwy, you may be a mare now, but I just want you to know that…no matter how old you get, I'll always be here to…to…"

Screwball threw her hooves around his middle. "I know, Dad. I know. I'll always be your little girl, just like you'll always be my Daddy Discord. No boy is ever going to change that."

She looked up at him. "When I didn't have my powers, and you brought me home, it made me realize that I can't always handle things by myself. There will be times when I need you, and I know all I have to do is whisper…"

"And I'll come running," he finished for her. "Well, not literally because I can teleport, but you get the picture."

They turned as the wedding march started playing outside. Discord held out his lion arm.

"Shall we?"

Screwball nodded as she levitated her bouquet into one hoof and took her father's arm with the other. She laughed as her father magically placed her veil over her face. They stood at the tent's entrance and peeked through as they waited for their cue. After Moonbeam and Zany made their way down the aisle, Discord glanced down at his daughter.

"Ready?"

Screwball took a deep breath and nodded. He magically opened the tent so they could proceed down the aisle. On the left sat the members of Screwball's honorary family, as well as many of her acquaintances from Ponyville and the princesses. The groom's side was so flooded that there weren't enough seats, so many of the changelings hovered above.

The bride looked ahead at the wedding arch. Twilight stood directly beneath, with Mothball on her left. Standing behind him was Trixie, Zany, Cinnamon Stick and Thunder Dash. Dinky, Lightning Dash,

Apple Blossom and Moonbeam stood on the other side of the arch. Screwball noticed all of them, but her eyes were focused on the handsome changeling in the tuxedo. She was glad that for once, in public, he wasn't in disguise.

When they reached the arch, Discord kissed his daughter's hoof. She could clearly see the tears forming in his eyes. Then he took his seat beside his wife. Screwball handed her bouquet to Dinky and faced the groom. Mothball lifted her veil to reveal her smiling face. Then they turned to the Princess of Friendship.

"Mares, gentlecolts," Twilight announced, "changelings and everything in between, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Screwball and Prince Mothball. Twenty years ago, I said these exact words for Screwball's parents. None of us thought *that* relationship would go anywhere."

There was a light snicker from the crowd.

"Well, we all make mistakes. But do you know what makes love so grand? It fixes those mistakes, for we are not only celebrating the union of two individuals, but the union of two species who have been at war for centuries. We have all come a long way in the past few decades. Enemies have become friends, the heartless have become whole, and hatred has turned to love. We would not be where we are today, if it hadn't been for these two. Now they can celebrate their love with no regrets.

"Do you, Prince Mothball, take this mare to be your lawfully wedded wife, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

Mothball nodded. "I do."

"And do you, Screwball, take this changeling to be your lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"You bet I do!" Screwball exclaimed.

Twilight chuckled and turned to Zany. "May I have the rings, please?"

The young colt lifted the pillow and Twilight levitated the rings over to the bride and groom. One was placed on Mothball's horn and the other on Screwball's hoof.

"By the power vested in me," Twilight finished, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the…"

Screwball grabbed Mothball and pressed her lips against his.

"Um," Twilight stammered, "the groom?"

"That's my girl!" Discord cheered.

After the reception, Screwball conjured up a hot air balloon with a "Just Married" sign to take her and Mothball on their honeymoon.

"You still haven't told me where we're going," Mothball whispered to his new wife.

"Wherever the wind may take us!" Screwball chimed. "Though, you know, we can start with Maris."

"Wait!"

Screwball turned to her father, who held out a package for her.

"A wedding present," he declared.

She opened the box to reveal a scroll. She unrolled it and gasped. It was a sketch of a house.

"I figured you two would need a place of your own now that you're married," Discord explained. "It's a small little cottage, but very spacious on the inside."

"Dad, this is…"

"It's also just three feet away from the castle, so you can visit us anytime."

Screwball raised her eyebrow at her father and then shook her head

with a smile. "Sounds perfect, Dad." She kissed him on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too, my little abomination."

As the bride and groom hopped into their balloon and rose into the air, everyone whistled and waved. Screwball then gasped when she remembered something.

"My bouquet!" she said as she held it up. "I completely forgot!"

"We're not out of range yet," said Mothball. "You still have time to throw it."

"Hmm. You're right." She leaned over the edge of the basket and hollered, "Okay, all you single mares down there! Incoming!"

She dropped the bouquet and all the single females scrambled to get under it as it plummeted toward them. The young foals, Zany, Applespike, Jewel and Twinkle watched the grown-ups in confusion.

"What are they all doing?" Jewel wondered aloud.

"I think they're trying to catch those flowers," said Applespike.

"You mean like a game?"

"I'm gonna win!" Zany cried as he zoomed upward.

"No, you not!" Twinkle exclaimed, flapping her wings.

When the bouquet was just above everyone's heads, it stopped in mid-air. One end was encased in gold magic while the other was encased in blue.

"I win!" Zany declared as he hovered beside the bouquet.

"Nuh-uh!" Twinkle shouted, flying up to the other side. "*I* win!"

"I got it first!"

"No, *I* did!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Uh-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

Everyone laughed as the two foals yanked the bouquet back and forth. They looked down at the adults in confusion.

"What you laughing at?" Zany asked.

"Do you foals even know what catching the bride's bouquet means?" Rarity snickered.

"What?" Twinkle and Zany said.

"Whoever catches the bouquet," Pinkie said, bouncing up between them, "is the next pony to get married!"

The two foals stared at each other with wide eyes. Twilight looked nervously up at Discord.

"You don't think…?" they said together.

After a while, Zany and Twinkle released their hold on the bouquet, flinched away from each other and cried, "EWWWWWW!"

Discord and Twilight sighed in relief.

"Phew!" the princess said, wiping her brow. "Imagine what a disaster *that* would be!"

"Yeah!" the draconequus laughed. "I mean *those two* ?! Come on!"

"I don't know, honey," Fluttershy smiled as she took her husband's paw. "Anything can happen."

Hope that was satisfactory enough. Really, you guys didn't catch that bit about Lightning?

For the record, I DO have another story planned for this series

involving Zany and Twinkle, but I'd like to finish the ones I have now before doing that. Besides, there are a few things I still have to figure out for that story.

No, we are not going to meet Mothball's or Trixie's dads, because they're not really significant. But NO! Mothball's dad is NOT Shining Armor!